

Ethno-nationalism and Right-Wing Extremist Violence in the United States, 2000 through 2018

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Abstract: Influential studies of right-wing extremist violence offer evidence that such violence is motivated by grievances intensified by a perceived loss in status or by economic dislocations. This article moves away from an emphasis on grievances by turning to theories of ethno-nationalism and group conflict. Ethno-nationalism is in part driven by attitudes of dominant groups favoring ethnic exclusion, whereas group threat theories explain that ethnic diversity increases the salience of ethnic boundaries and fuels a collective response to group threat. Such threats encourage violence to contain this threat and restore dominance. Exclusionary attitudes and support for expanded gun rights in America further legitimize a culture of ethno-nationalism that encourages violent acts. I test these arguments with data from the Pew Research Center, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Extremist Crime Database on right-wing violence. The state-level and county-level results support the claim that rising ethnic diversity raises the rate and volume of right-wing violence significantly. State-level results also find that rising memberships in the National Rifle Association increase the rate of right-wing violence significantly.

Keywords: right-wing violence; ethno-nationalism; gun culture; ethnic diversity; social movements

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THE siege of Congress by a right-wing mob on January 6, 2021, the March for the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 that turned deadly, and malicious activity by extremist groups such as the Proud Boys and QAnon have renewed curiosity about the roots of contemporary right-wing violence in the United States. In the wake of these events, policy analysts have called for more research on domestic violence. For example, Jones (2018) argues that the need for policymakers to focus on domestic right-wing violence is long overdue, having been overshadowed by concerns about international terrorism since 9/11.

Although outbreaks of right-wing domestic terrorism in the United States may well have been slighted by scholars in the past, this picture is changing. For instance, Piazza (2017) finds that terrorist violence in the United States is now more likely to be perpetrated by right-wing extremists than by either international or left-wing groups (see also Jasko et al. 2022). At the same time, the overall picture of right-wing organizations remains mixed. For example, the most recent annual report of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) states that the number of right-wing groups engaged in violence has declined significantly since 2017, reversing a decades-long trend (SPLC 2022). Furthermore, despite the flurry of new (mostly online) right-wing groups that have gained attention, some of the more established organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, have recently suffered significant declines in their finances, memberships, and reputations (McVeigh and Estep 2019).

These claims are not necessarily contradictory. Although the absolute number of right-wing groups has declined, violent activity by these groups remains a serious

threat. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) reports that since the 1980s, attacks by right-wing extremist groups have been rising as a proportion of all violent attacks in the United States (Miller 2017:3–5). The SPLC (2022) has indicated that, despite the decline in organizational presence, these groups are extremely active on social media and many have expanded their networks globally (Fatherree 2022; see also Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair 2019).

Right-wing violence has been distinguished by its targets and goals. Seth Jones (2018:1) prefers the label right-wing terrorism (instead of violence). He defines right-wing terrorism as violence shaped by its political goals:

right-wing terrorism commonly refers to the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities whose goals may include racial, ethnic, or religious supremacy; opposition to government authority; and the end of practices like abortion.

Erin Miller (2017:6) defines right-wing violence for the START consortium in terms of beliefs or world views, including nationalism:¹

Violence in support of the belief that personal and/or national way of life is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent. Characterized by anti-globalism, racial or ethnic supremacy or nationalism, suspicion of centralized federal authority, reverence for individual liberty, and/or belief in conspiracy theories that involve grave threat[s] to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty.

Such definitions help to identify changes in the landscape of terrorism. Researchers report that from 1970 through the mid-2000s, the majority of terrorist attacks had a left-wing ideology, but, by the 2010s, groups with either a right-wing, religious, or nationalist ideology predominated (24 percent of attacks had an unknown ideology) (Jasko et al. 2022).

The handful of theories offered to explain the proliferation of right-wing extremism in the United States range broadly among explanations emphasizing status loss, economic dislocation, or the increasing partisan polarization of the electorate. To provide a more cohesive theoretical perspective, this article joins arguments from theories of group conflict and ethno-nationalism to analyze right-wing violence.

My argument builds on Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock's (2021) claim that right-wing politics in the United States can be usefully analyzed as a manifestation of ethno-nationalism. Prior work on ethno-nationalism has relied mainly on documenting ethno-nationalism in terms of one or more constellations of highly correlated attitudes and relating them to right-wing political and partisan outcomes. Bonikowski (2017:S201–2) characterizes these attitudes as products of social changes that produced a resurgence in populist and ethno-nationalist politics in the United States and Europe:

The combined effects of economic, cultural, and social changes are perceived as impinging on the life chances, dignity and moral commitments of in-group members, who perceive themselves as increasingly sidelined by elites and mainstream culture and who view members of other

groups as having been granted unfair advantages in society, often by those same vilified elites.

This article begins by briefly reviewing several leading explanations of right-wing violence that have received uneven support. I seek to develop a more comprehensive theoretical argument that highlights the role of ethno-nationalism. The argument and analyses unfold in three steps. First, I use survey data from the Pew Research Center to test the claim that ethno-nationalist sentiment will be empirically associated with anti-immigration sentiment and support for the gun culture in America. Second, I develop the argument that ethno-nationalism will generate right-wing violence under conditions of increasing ethnic diversity, of rising participation in America's gun culture, and where allied elites are in power. Third, I assess this argument at both the state and county levels using information on right-wing violent events archived in the Extremist Crime Database and right-wing extremist organizations listed by the SPLC. For the analysis at the state level, I use event-history methods to estimate the effects on the hazard of right-wing violence. To provide a more fine-grained and local picture, I analyze the count of right-wing extremist violence at the county level. For this analysis, I use multilevel negative binomial models to capture both the county-level and state-level factors.

Right-Wing Extremism

What do we know about right-wing extremist violence? Many analysts focus on the benefits derived from establishing right-wing organizations.² Yet there is a serious debate over whether the presence of organizations promotes or undermines the use of radical tactics in social movements. One leading tradition studying social movements suggests that organizations enhance a movement's tactical performance, visibility, and recruitment efforts (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977).

On the other side of the debate, early social theorists such as Michels (1911), Piven and Cloward (1977), and Weber (1947) argued there is a trade-off between organizational involvement and radicalism.³ Michels' (1911) perspective explicitly predicted that radicalism inevitably declines as goals of organizational survival eclipse more radical objectives and tactics.

The available empirical evidence on the impact of organizations on U.S. right-wing extremist violence has produced ambiguous results. For example, Miller (2017) reported that few attacks in the START-ECDB data between 2010 and 2016 could be linked to formal organizations. Other scholars of right-wing extremism report an ecological relationship between the presence of right-wing groups in a region and outbreaks of violent attacks in a city, region, or country. Asal et al. (2020) find that the use of previous violence and alliances with other extremist groups encourage more violence by right-wing extremist organizations. Adamczyk et al. (2014) find that the presence of a hate group (labeled as such by SPLC) in a county significantly increases the chances that right-wing violence will erupt in that county (but see Mulholland 2011).

There is also evidence that right-wing views have spilled over into mainstream politics, which has increased the rate of the adoption of right-wing extremist views

within at least one established political party in the United States (Bonikowski et al. 2021; Fording and Schram 2020). For example, Petchesky (1981) analyzes the successful mobilization efforts of the anti-abortion movement that received support from right-wing political and religious organizations, including pro-life statements that were incorporated into the 1980 Republican party platform. Yet Thompson and Hawley (2021) report that since 2018, the relationship between individuals' support for the alt-right movement from those affiliated with the Republican party has declined significantly.

Others argue support for extremist groups has contributed to the growing partisan divide in America (Bonikowski et al. 2021). For example, Nemeth and Hansen (2022) find that right-wing violence was more common in counties that were White and significantly more competitive politically. Others point to a similar process of ethnic outbidding, in which large numbers of ethnic organizations compete for dominance. The heightened level of competition raises the incentive for ethnic organizations to adopt increasingly hostile positions, which in turn increases the risk of civil conflict and violence (Vogt, Gleditsch, and Cederman 2021).

The relationship between right-wing extremist groups and hate crimes (defined and compiled by the FBI; see <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/hate-crime>) has also been investigated, but the evidence associating these groups with hate crimes is not persuasive. Ryan and Leeson (2011) find no empirical evidence that a link between groups and hate crime existed at the county level from 2002 to 2008. Using the same sources of data, Mulholland (2011) finds no relationship between the presence of one or more hate groups and the occurrence of FBI-recorded hate crimes analyzed from 1997 through 2007.

Only a few scholars have investigated the conditions under which right-wing violence emerges (for reviews, see Blee and Creasap 2010; Jasko et al. 2022). Pioneering work on the Ku Klux Klan (McVeigh 2009; McVeigh and Cunningham 2012) and the continuing influence of the Klan (McVeigh and Estep 2019) finds that perceptions of loss have produced a sense of resentment among White Protestants that fuels the current rise in ethno-nationalism. Olzak (1990) uncovered a systematic relationship between lynching and economic competition between Whites and Blacks. These results are consistent with the argument that the upward mobility of disadvantaged groups threatens the power and status of the majority and increases racial violence (see also Tolnay and Beck 1995). However, neither Adamczyk et al. (2014) nor Piazza (2017) find any evidence that a deterioration in economic conditions was related to rates of right-wing violence. Adding to these findings, Nemeth and Hansen (2022) discovered that wealthier counties are significantly *more* likely to have had a violent right-wing event.

The empirical evidence investigating the impact of status loss on the proliferation of right-wing organizations is somewhat equivocal. Van Dyke and Soule (2002) report a relationship between the number of right-wing militia groups and measures of status loss that include jobs lost from industrialization and the disappearance of family farms, gains by Blacks in wages and jobs, and relative gains by women (see also McVeigh 2009; Piazza 2017). Yet Freilich and Pridemore (2005) find no empirical support for the backlash or threat argument on right-wing militia groups. In sum, theories of status loss have achieved varying degrees of support.

Theoretical Argument and Hypotheses

The discrepant results reviewed above provide the impetus for developing a more comprehensive theory of right-wing violence. The lack of a cumulative theoretical perspective may be because these studies have focused on different historical periods or actions of very different groups (e.g., the Klan versus anti-abortion activists). Few attempts have been made to reconcile the theoretical arguments. To remedy this, I provide an explanation that seeks to integrate theories of ethno-nationalism, group threat, and social movements.

Bonikowski et al. (2021) define ethno-nationalism as a constellation of beliefs that reflects attitudes favoring ethnic homogeneity, anti-immigrant views, and nationalism. Bonikowski et al. (2021) find that right-wing politics are associated with exclusionary beliefs linked to cultural attitudes that promote a return to a more idyllic and ethnically homogeneous past. What explains the current surge in right-wing extremist political activity? Bonikowski et al. (2021:500) explain how features of ethno-nationalism are associated with the contemporary right-wing political movement:

[the] confluence of structural conditions, particularly those that threaten existing ethnoracial status hierarchies, may bring disputes about the nation's meaning to the forefront of political claims making and individual-level political preferences . . . Given the prominence of antiminority discourse in contemporary radical-right politics, the current era appears to represent such a conjuncture.

Theories of ethno-nationalism claim that supporters of right-wing politics endorse an American nationalist identity that holds negative views of racial minorities, immigrants, and non-Christian religious adherents. Bonikowski et al. (2021) also find that the emergence of this White nationalist movement has reinforced the polarization of attitudes that now characterize partisan politics in America (see also Thompson 2021).

A second and related argument suggests that a growing pro-gun culture in the United States has become more active in right-wing politics (Lacombe 2019). More relevant to ethno-nationalist sentiment, supporters of this gun culture also express a set of concerns and anxieties about cultural shifts regarding gender, race, and economic distress (Freilich and Pridemore 2005). Based on this research, identification with America's gun culture ought to be associated with ethno-nationalist sentiment.

To examine the relationships among ethno-nationalist sentiment, anti-immigrant views, and support for the gun culture, I analyze poll data obtained from the Pew Research Center's 2018 American Trends Panel. I create three index scores using principal component analysis to explore the claim that anti-immigrant attitudes, support for the gun culture, and expressions of ethno-nationalism are associated.

I begin by constructing an index of ethno-nationalism, using several questionnaire items from prior research. The Pew data are useful because they contain several items indicating support for pro-gun and anti-immigrant views. They also contain three of the same indicators of ethno-nationalism used by Bonikowski et al. (2021). These are attitudes agreeing with America's superiority among all countries,

being a U.S. citizen, and being native-born (see Bonikowski, et al. 2021:Figure 1). Instead of a broad “Christian” affiliation used by Bonikowski et al. (2021) and Thompson (2021), I add a fourth measure of ethno-nationalism, that of evangelical religious affiliation, which has been closely linked to right-wing political support (see the online supplement, Appendix A, Table A1).⁴

To measure anti-immigrant views, I constructed an index composed of three items (see the online supplement, Appendix A, Table A2). They include negative views of both legal and illegal immigrants and an overall assessment that ethnic diversity is bad for the country.

My indicator of support for the gun culture includes two questions indicating whether or not gun laws should be less strict than they are currently and whether or not the phrase “supporter of the National Rifle Association” describes the respondent well (see Table A3 in the online supplement).

Table 1 reports regression coefficients and jackknife standard errors showing that ethno-nationalist attitudes are significantly and positively associated with anti-immigrant attitudes. Furthermore, support for the gun culture is also positively associated with exclusionary views, adding more support to the claim that support for the gun culture is relevant to ethno-nationalism. Note also that this model controls for education, gender, income, and metropolitan residence. It also controls for Republican party affiliation, which is significant, but its addition does not diminish the influence of ethno-nationalist sentiment on anti-immigrant sentiment.

Tables A1 through A3 in the online supplement list components of each index using principal component analysis estimates.

Table 2 reports estimates highlighting support for the gun culture as a dependent variable. The relationship between support for the gun culture and indicators of ethno-nationalism is positive and statistically significant in Table 2. Anti-immigrant attitudes and Republican party affiliation are also associated with the gun culture, as expected by my argument.

Processes Associated with Right-Wing Violence

Ethnic Diversity

The next step in the argument uses boundary theories of group threat to explain why increases in ethnic diversity instigate exclusionary activity. Diversity raises the salience of ethnic boundaries fueled by perceptions of group threat held by dominant groups (Abascal 2020; Olzak 1992). Perceptions of an increasing threat further encourage the use of violence to reduce fears and restore dominance (Blalock 1967; Bobo and Hutchings 1996). I then offer the claim that the presence of allied organizations and like-minded elected representatives escalates attacks on out-groups by legitimating the view that violent acts are justified in the face of a rising threat. As right-wing movements gain momentum, they motivate politicians allied with them to play the race/ethnic card (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Nemeth and Hansen 2022). As a result of these processes, the risk of violence escalates (Vogt, Gleditsch, and Cederman 2021).

Table 1: Regression estimates of the effect of ethno-nationalist sentiment on anti-immigrant attitudes

Covariates	
Index of ethno-nationalist attitudes	0.211 [†] (0.027)
Index of support for American gun culture	0.073 [†] (0.024)
Family income (nine categories): <\$10,000, \$10–20,000, \$20–30,000, \$30–40,000, \$40–50,000, \$50–75,000, \$75–100,000, \$100–150,000, >\$150,000	–0.028* (0.011)
Education level (three categories): less than high school, some college, BA or more	0.052 (0.031)
Age category (four categories): 18–29, 30–49, 50–64, 65+	0.092 [†] (0.023)
Gender: male=1, female=0	–0.102* (0.047)
Metropolitan residence (0,1)	0.101 (0.065)
Republican party affiliation (0,1)	0.448 [†] (0.063)
Constant	–0.407 [†] (0.126)
F (8, 5,011)	53.19 [†]
R-squared	0.194
N of observations	5,019

Notes: Jackknife standard errors in parentheses (5,193 repetitions). [†] $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Source: Pew Research Center's 2018 American Trends Panel, September 24 to October 7, 2018.

This argument suggests that supporters of right-wing ideologies will engage in violence under conditions of *increasing ethnic diversity*. Ethnic diversity—driven by immigration and migration—provokes fears that the cultural identity and dominance of majority-White Americans are being threatened (Bonikowski 2017). Anti-immigration and anti-Black sentiment now play a central role in right-wing ideology (Asal et al. 2020; McVeigh and Estep 2019).

Moreover, such sentiments have been frequently deployed to justify attacks on out-groups (Bonikowski 2017; Thompson 2021). In both the United States and Europe, opposition to immigration has been framed as a threat to security and stability that requires a response to contain that threat. For example, violent attacks on immigrants rose after the huge influx of immigrants in Germany in 2015, and opposition to immigration has become a key element in right-wing party platforms (Eger and Olzak 2022).

Table 2: Regression estimates of the effect of ethno-nationalist sentiment on support for America's gun culture

Covariates	
Index of ethno-nationalist attitudes	0.165 [†] (0.027)
Index of anti-immigrant sentiment	0.077 [†] (0.026)
Family income (nine categories): <\$10,000, \$10–20,000, \$20–30,000, \$30–40,000, \$40–50,000, \$50–75,000, \$75–100,000, \$100–150,000, >\$150,000	–0.012 (0.013)
Education level (three categories): less than high school, some college, BA or more	0.163 [†] (0.032)
Age category (four categories): 18–29, 30–49, 50–64, 65+	–0.096 [†] (0.024)
Gender: male=1, female=0	0.187 [†] (0.050)
Metropolitan residence (0,1)	–0.339 [†] (0.076)
Republican party affiliation (0,1)	1.269 [†] (0.061)
Constant	–0.244 (0.137)
F (8, 5,011)	66.85 [†]
R-squared	0.393
N of observations	5,019

Notes: Jackknife standard errors in parentheses (5,193 repetitions). [†] $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. *Source:* Pew Research Center's 2018 American Trends Panel, September 24 to October 7, 2018.

Research on ethnic exclusionary movements offers insights into the reasons why right-wing groups frequently target members of specific racial or ethnic identity groups.⁵ In his path-breaking theoretical work, Barth (1969) analyzed ethnic and racial conflict as an expression of boundary maintenance. In this view, perceived threats by an ethnic or nationality group mobilize attacks on an out-group to defend the in-group's boundary (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Fox and Guglielmo 2012; Olzak and Shanahan 2014). In the past, increases in ethnic diversity due to immigration or migration in the United States have provoked claims by the Ku Klux Klan (and others) that White nationalist identity is being threatened (McVeigh 2009; McVeigh and Cunningham 2012). Contemporary right-wing leaders have relabeled these ideas as "replacement theory," which claims the existence of the White majority and its cultural legacy are being threatened by ethnic and racial diversity (Wilson and Flanagan 2022).

The claim that ethnic diversity is a driving force behind right-wing violence also resonates with theories of ethnic competition and group threat (e.g., Blalock 1967; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; McVeigh 2009; Olzak 1992). By definition, rising ethnic diversity reduces ethnic homogeneity. Where ethnic homogeneity has also been accompanied by the concentration of a dominant ethnic group in positions of power and authority, ethnic diversity will be perceived as a threat to that hegemony. Such threats are often met with violence. Asal et al. (2020) found that, since 1976, right-wing groups expressing a white supremacist ideology are significantly more likely to engage in violent acts than groups with other types of ideologies (Asal et al. 2020).

Strategies for suppressing ethnic and racial groups in America's past have included widespread violence such as lynching and other mob attacks (McVeigh 2009; McVeigh and Estep 2019; Olzak 1992; Tolnay and Beck 1995). Other tactics used previously against minorities include occupational and residential segregation, incarceration, and other forms of social control (e.g., King and Wheelock 2007; Lieberman 1980; Olzak and Shanahan 2014).

Current right-wing ideologues frequently express the view that ethnic diversity is an urgent social problem that requires an immediate solution (McVeigh and Estep 2019; Perliger 2020). Claims that ethnic and racial diversity threatens society can be transformed into a call to action by leaders of right-wing groups (SPLC 2022). This argument implies that higher levels of ethnic diversity will increase the rate of right-wing violence:

H1: Higher levels of ethnic diversity will result in a higher incidence of right-wing violence.

Increase in Support for the Gun Culture in America

The contemporary gun culture in America conveys an important social identity that has become more prominently identified with right-wing politics in recent decades (Joslyn et al. 2017; Lacombe 2021; Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild 2019). Similarly, Joslyn et al. (2017:383) document the existence of two distinct and oppositional gun cultures in the United States that "impose meaning and significance on guns." Scholars have argued that the National Rifle Association (NRA) has successfully attracted large numbers of members who advocate pro-gun rights, oppose federal regulation over state gun laws, and endorse candidates from the Republican party (Lacombe 2019; Perliger 2020; Steidley 2018).

There is also some evidence showing that support for America's gun culture is associated with higher rates of right-wing violence. Van Dyke and Soule (2002) discovered that states with weaker gun control laws had higher numbers of right-wing patriot militias. Lacombe (2019) argues that the NRA uses its media arm to convey the view that efforts to implement more restrictive gun policies are a serious threat to gun owners and that this threat requires political resistance (see also Steidley 2018). Consistent with this view, O'Brien and Haider-Markel (1998) found the pro-gun culture (measured by NRA memberships) is related to the number of right-wing militias at the state level (but see Freilich and Pridemore 2005). Together, this research suggests the following hypothesis:

H2: Increases in membership in the NRA will increase rates of right-wing violence.

Growth in Right-Wing Extremist Organizations

A third argument comes from social movement theory. It holds that organizations affiliated with a social movement are critical to its longevity and tactical success. In an influential theoretical statement on terrorism, Martha Crenshaw (1987:21) contrasts an organizational approach with the conventional grievance perspective explaining violence:

Organizational analysis explains not only why terrorism continues regardless of political results, but why it starts. It implies that structural explanations of civil violence are of limited use. The objective conditions likely to inspire grievances and hence incite violence are permanent, whereas violence is not continuous or universal . . . The formation of organizations, not environmental conditions, are [is] critical . . .

Furthermore, organizations are arguably more important for movements engaged in terrorism or other violent acts (Olzak 2022). This is because terrorist groups extract high costs from participants committing such acts, including arrest, injury, and death. As a result, leaders and advocates engage in constant efforts to maintain commitment and overcome complacency. As McCarthy and Zald (1977) explained, organizations provide a necessary vehicle for accumulating the resources necessary for mobilization. Successful organizations also engage in identity-creating activity, which further heightens solidarity within a cultural-identity movement such as ethno-nationalism.

Arguments developed from the McCarthy–Zald resource mobilization perspective expect that ethno-nationalism will flourish as the number of right-wing extremist organizations rises. Social movement theory also expects movement supporters to become empowered when organizational allies exist. Such empowerment encourages violence to the extent that a movement adopts a contentious and adversarial stance. Supporters of ethno-nationalist ideologies frequently characterize themselves as being persecuted and ostracized. As Perliger (2020:117) argues, “They feel that their marginalization is part of the growing hostility toward (or war against) their culture, values, and way of life and thus become motivated to participate in acts of ‘resistance.’”

Violence against racial or ethnic groups also arises in a context where there are many ethno-nationalist organizations. As theories of *ethnic outbidding* introduced above explain, this means that ethnic organizations in a crowded field will compete for support and resource by escalating demands for ethnic exclusion and demonizing minorities. Vogt et al.’s (2021) cross-national analysis found that ethnic outbidding significantly raised rates of violence and civil conflict of all kinds.

Consistent with ethnic outbidding theory, research on domestic and international terrorism also finds that a terrorist organization with more rivals increases the chance that it will engage in violence (Olzak 2022; Philips 2015). Similarly, Asal et al. (2020) found that right-wing organizations that had more alliances with other

organizations were more likely to be violent. These findings imply that higher numbers of right-wing organizations in a state raise the level of competition for media attention, supporters, and other resources. One way to gain a competitive edge is by engaging in violent tactics. This argument implies the following hypothesis:

H3: The presence of more right-wing extremist organizations in a state or a county will be associated with a higher rate of right-wing extremist violence.

We add one caveat here. Recall that Robert Michels (1911) and others emphasized that if organizations want to survive, then the use of radical and violent tactics comes at a price (including repression by authorities) that might threaten that survival. Other costs may include the potential withdrawal of public support for a movement if violence is deployed. This argument suggests that an inverse relationship exists between the number of right-wing organizations and violence (which is the opposite of H3).

The link between organizational infrastructure and movement success raises the question of whether there is an association between growth in NRA membership and other groups allied with right-wing causes. Figure 1 plots the number of annual hate groups identified as right-wing extremist groups by the SPLC against the number of NRA members (in 100,000s) in the United States, from 2000 through 2018. Although organizations and memberships are not equivalent, we see the trajectories of both are similar. From 2000 through 2018, we see a gradual increase in right-wing hate groups (with a noticeable dip in 2015) that parallels an increase in NRA membership that began in earnest around 2007. After 2014, we see a sharp increase in NRA membership. Yet in 2017, the number of right-wing organizations began to decline. These trends suggest (although not conclusively) that since 2000 until recently, there has been a parallel increase in NRA memberships and right-wing extremist organizations.

Elite Allies in Power

A final argument emphasizes the role of elites in diffusing and legitimating violence.⁶ By this argument, if the views of elected representatives are aligned with ethno-nationalist goals, they can be perceived as at least implicitly endorsing the idea that a movement's goals are legitimate and that their actions are justified. As Bonikowski (2017:S207) argues, once these ethno-nationalist goals have been voiced by political elites, "it is difficult to make them latent again." Trump's infamous "stand back and stand by" message to the Proud Boys is a dramatic example (Belew 2020).

The political opportunity structure perspective from social movement theory makes a similar prediction. It claims that movements of all kinds benefit from having *allies in positions of political power*. For example, research finds that social movements gain traction when elected officials support movement goals, organizations, or activities (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). In this view, elites signal support, provide necessary network access to decision-makers, and assist movement activists in securing access to funding and strategic insider information.

Political elites legitimate acts of violence, either directly or indirectly, by giving firebrand speeches, endorsing radical right-wing party platforms, and announcing

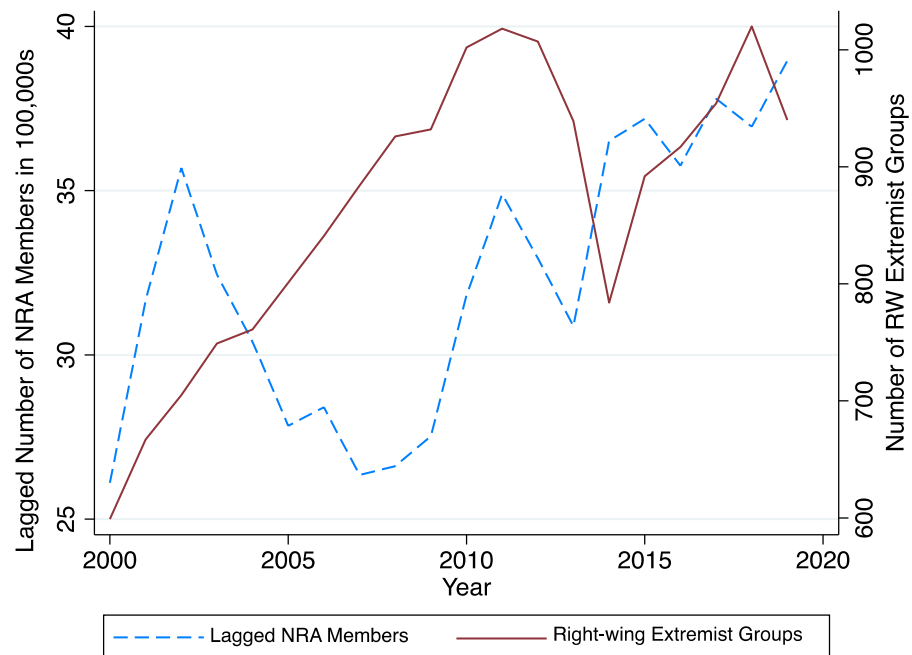


Figure 1: Number of right-wing extremist groups and NRA membership.

support for right-wing organizations and their members. Koopmans and Olzak (2004) argue that speeches and press conferences by elected officials shape the direction of “public discourse,” which influences rates of violence. They discovered that elite discourse concerning immigrants—both positive and negative—was systematically associated with levels of violence directed against immigrants in German states. This suggests that words matter and that words of politicians may matter even more.

Examining the effect of party elites on right-wing extremism, Perliger (2020) finds that Republicans in power were highly correlated with periods of higher rates of right-wing violence. As Perliger (2020:98) indicates, this correlation may be because right-wing groups feel more empowered when like-minded officials are in power, or it may be that rising right-wing attacks embolden representatives to support the goals of such groups. Either explanation is consistent with theories of ethno-nationalism, which find that the activities of right-wing extremists and their Republican allies are mutually beneficial. This suggests the following hypotheses:

H4: States with Republican-dominated legislators will have a higher rate of right-wing violence compared with states with Democratic or evenly split legislative bodies.

H5: States with Republican governors will have a higher rate of right-wing violence compared with states with Democratic governors.

Units of Analysis

I analyze these hypotheses at both the state and county levels. Because control of legislatures by political parties operates at the state level, I begin with an analysis of right-wing violence using state-level measures to capture these contextual effects. However, there is considerable variation within states, often related to up-state and downstate differences, urban versus rural locations, the concentration of immigrants, and other factors that could conceivably influence the amount of right-wing extremist violence. For this reason, I also analyze right-wing violence at the county level. Because the data on violence are sparsely distributed across counties, I estimate models of the counts of events at the county level (level 1) using multilevel models that allow me to include state-level covariates (in level 2).

Dependent Variable: Right-Wing Extremist Violence

My first dependent variable is the rate of extremist violence obtained from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) provided by the Terrorism and Extremist Violence in the United States (TEVUS) Database and Portal, under the auspices of START (Freilich, Belli, and Chermak 2011). This data set contains information on all violent crimes in which people died or were injured or that were bombings or arson events perpetrated by a person or group expressing an extremist ideology. I used the online filter procedures by first selecting only right-wing groups to produce a set of violent right-wing events identified by date, location, group name, aliases, and a summary of the chronology of the event, in addition to the filter that designates an event as right-wing violence.

I then created an event-history spreadsheet that counted each type of event that occurred in each county and state in the United States in a year. I deleted (a) redundant events that were counted separately by ECDB but that had the same perpetrator and occurred within minutes of each other in the same location, as exemplified by a spree shooting attacking several victims of different ethnicities on the same street, (b) events in which the right-wing motivation was unstated or unclear, and (c) events that were reported as planned, but not executed. In the final step, I created two backbone files of all states and all counties for each year, beginning in 1999 and ending in 2018. I then merged these two data sets to create a data set that includes counties with zero, one, or more events in a given year.

The richness of the ECDB data set yielded a finite set of targets, including Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, LGBTQ persons, government authorities or officials, Asians, abortion providers, homeless persons, Indians and Southeast Asians, Muslims, immigrants not specified by nationality, Native Americans, sex offenders and drug offenders, and generalized right-wing targets.

The connection between gun violence and right-wing events in this data set is striking. In 44 percent of all right-wing events, firearms were used. Other weapons included firebombs, arson, incendiary devices, bombs, knives, machetes, axes, baseball bats, wire, and, of course, bare hands and fists. As might be expected, firebombs and arson were most likely to be used against buildings and institutional targets, such as abortion provider offices and government buildings.

Table 3: Targets of right-wing attacks, 2000 to 2018

Target	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Black	45	19.31	19.31
Latino	10	4.29	23.61
Jewish	14	6.01	29.61
LGBTQ	17	7.3	36.91
Government	32	13.73	50.64
General right-wing	53	22.75	73.39
Asian	4	1.72	75.11
Abortion	6	2.58	77.68
Homeless	5	2.15	79.83
Southeast Asian or Indian	8	3.43	83.26
Muslim	33	14.16	97.42
Immigrants generally	1	0.43	97.85
Native American	1	0.43	98.28
Sex or drug offender	4	1.72	100
Total	233	100	

Source: Extremist Crime Database via TEVUS at <https://tap.cast.uark.edu/>.

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of attacks by targets in the ECDB data set. Unsurprisingly, right-wing violent events against Blacks contribute the largest (19 percent) proportion of all events targeting a specific race, ethnicity, or identity group. Table 3 shows that more than 22 percent of events were classified as “general right-wing targets.”

Ideally, it would be useful to analyze rates of right-wing violence separately for each target. But because these events are dispersed across 50 states and 19 years, the cell frequencies are simply too small to use in an analysis of separate targets. Another issue is that the category of “general right-wing” targets seems too heterogeneous. Upon close inspection, I found an event in this category could have had multiple targets (e.g., immigrants, Blacks, Muslims, and federal buildings), or it could have invoked support for general right-wing causes. For these reasons, it makes more sense to aggregate all events designated as right-wing violence by the ECDB.

Independent Variables

Right-Wing Extremist Organizations

Following research by Adamczyk et al. (2014), Mulholland (2011), Ryan and Leeson (2011), and Van Dyke and Soule (2002), I use the SPLC’s annual reports of organizations, their location, and ideology, which are available online. Although the SPLC does not provide distinct criteria for inclusion (and some have criticized their listing as being too broad), groups that espouse the following ideologies give a clearer sense of motivation: anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, Christian

identity, general hate, hate music, male supremacy, Neo-Völkisch, Ku Klux Klan, neo-confederate, neo-Nazi, racist skinhead, and white nationalist.

To confront suspicions that SPLC overcounts certain types of organizations (see Asal et al. 2020:254; Piazza 2017:59), I examined several online newspaper archives and online sources that included the self-descriptions of the goals or purposes of each organization listed by the SPLC. I omitted organizations whose main activities did not specify right-wing goals. The organizations that remain in my analysis had to show evidence of mission statements (available online) that included hostility toward one or more identity groups, anti-government stands, or statements supporting white nationalism. Using this more stringent criterion, I discarded more than 80 religious and music organizations included in SPLC from my final data set (see also Asal et al. 2020).

Although the SPLC began monitoring Klan groups and neo-Nazi organizations in the early 1990s, it recently added a comprehensive listing of anti-government right-wing militias that comprise the encompassing “Patriots” movement in the United States. I use complete data on the history of 1,289 distinct organizations that operated from 2000 through the end of 2018.

In contrast to Van Dyke and Soule (2002:503), I include Christian nationalist organizations listed by the SPLC if I could find independent evidence to verify that their organizational mission expressed ideologies that were actively hostile to Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Blacks, or non-believers. This decision relies on the defining features of ethno-nationalism, which include the presence of ethnic exclusionary beliefs and attitudes (Bonikowski 2017:S208). Evidence of exclusionary views in these organizations came from quotes from church sermons, personal websites of pastors, and newspaper accounts of purposes or speeches given at church rallies. In addition, my decision to include Christian identity groups is also based on research showing that Christian nationalists are an important constituency of right-wing extremist groups (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022). In addition, Freilich et al. (2018) find that opposition to abortion is an important factor motivating violent extremist groups, which suggests Christian nationalism now plays a critical role in supporting a variety of right-wing causes (e.g., Gorski and Perry 2022).

I use all available years to track the founding and years of operation for each distinct organization. For a different strategy, consider Adamczyk et al.’s (2014) decision to aggregate the counts of SPLC organizations into two decades: 1990 to 1999 and 2000 to 2012. In contrast, my strategy allows me to include time-varying measures to estimate annual rates of right-wing violence.

Ethnic Diversity

After careful consideration of the debate about which ethnic diversity measures perform better, I settled on the Entropy index. The entropy index (E) has several useful properties: it measures the distribution (or evenness) of each ethnic group, but it is not limited to a zero-to-one range, as are other measures of diversity. Higher numbers indicate the evenness of multiple groups in a county, indicating higher diversity. Detailed information on the proportions of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics,

and Asian and Pacific Islanders is available from the U.S. Census at the county level (proportions were recalculated at the state level for the state-level analysis).

The entropy index (E) is formally defined as follows:

$$E = \sum_{r=1}^n p_r \ln \frac{1}{p_r},$$

where p_r refers to the proportion of the population of a racial or ethnic group, r , in a geographical unit (state or county) and n indicates the number of groups under consideration. The maximum value of E occurs only when all groups are of equal size.

NRA Memberships

The NRA has contributed to a growing cultural divide that coincides with the type of cultural shift that Bonikowski (2017) characterizes as part of the evolution of ethno-nationalist movements in the United States and Europe. The NRA has successfully attracted large numbers of members who advocate pro-gun rights, oppose federal regulation over state gun laws and regulations, and endorse candidates from the Republican party (Lacombe 2019; Perliger 2020; Steidley 2018). To capture the growth and size of this organization in a state, I use Steidley's (2018) estimates of memberships in the NRA. These data include counts of semiannual (averaged annually) membership taken from subscriptions to the *American Rifleman*, *American Hunter*, and *America's 1st Freedom* magazines that automatically come with a membership to the NRA. Lacombe (2019) also credits these magazines as a major influence in encouraging the adoption of a pro-gun identity. State population size increases the numbers that can be recruited, so I include measures of state (and county) populations in all models.

Control Measures

Control measures for the state-level analysis include population size, the lagged count of right-wing violent events, state gross domestic product, state-level gun policies, and a time trend. I also considered a measure of *public opinion*. A state's political climate has been used as a rough indicator of aggregate opinions and views in measures of right-wing violence (Nemeth and Hansen 2022). To replicate their analysis, I initially explored the revised 1960-to-2016 citizen ideology series, updated by Berry et al. (2010). This is a measure of citizens' ideological placement on a liberal-conservative continuum in a state. Surprisingly, I found no evidence that a state's liberal citizenry affected the rate of right-wing violence. Also, because information on this measure ends in 2016, I dropped it from the analysis.⁷

To capture state variation in *gun-law policies*, I include a time-varying measure of a state's passage of laws surrounding the permit process, referred to as "may issue" versus "shall issue" states. "May issue" states require an application to obtain a gun permit, whereas "shall issue" states lack this requirement. Michael Siegel and associates have compiled information on this time-varying measure at the state level for the years 1991 through 2016 (Siegel et al. 2017, 2020). I extended information on

this measure through the year 2018. By the end of 2018, only eight states were “may issue” states: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. Siegel and his associates (2020:347) find that “[l]aws requiring permits to purchase a gun are associated with lower incidence of mass shootings and bans on large capacity magazines are associated with fewer fatalities and nonfatal injuries when such events do occur.”

County-Level Measures

My second analysis focuses on counts of right-wing violent events calculated at the county level. I used mixed-level negative binomial estimation procedures that are appropriate for use with count data where there is evidence of overdispersion. Because the data on events are thin (there are many zero counts), I reduced the number of covariates in the analysis by focusing on those theoretically important measures central to findings reported in prior research on right-wing violence (e.g., Adamczyk et al. 2014; Nemeth and Hansen 2022). These include measures of ethnic diversity and urbanization (calculated at the county level for this analysis) and the rate of NRA memberships in the state in which the county is located.

Control Measures

I include four county-level control measures: lagged count of right-wing violent events in a county, population size, county gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and a measure of the proportion of women in the labor force, which Nemeth and Hansen (2022) report was a significant predictor of county-level violence.⁸

Multilevel Analysis

Counties are embedded in states whose laws govern gun policies, so it is important to include several state-level measures in the county analysis. Based on findings from Table B1 in the online supplement, I included NRA membership and counts of right-wing organizations at the state level (level 2) as well as county-level measures of ethnic diversity, prior violence, population, GDP, urban percentage, and labor force participation of women (level 1). Following arguments about the importance of a state having the more restrictive “may issue” law regarding gun permits (compared with the less restrictive “shall issue” policy), I also include a dummy variable that equals one if a state is a “may issue” state.

Estimation Procedures

The ECDB data set on right-wing violence provides information on the date, location, victim, and specific right-wing orientation of acts of violence. It also provides a sentence or two describing the event, with citations to the news media website where the event can be confirmed.

For the state-level analysis, this means that I can employ event-history analysis that focuses on factors that increase the rate of violence over a year.⁹

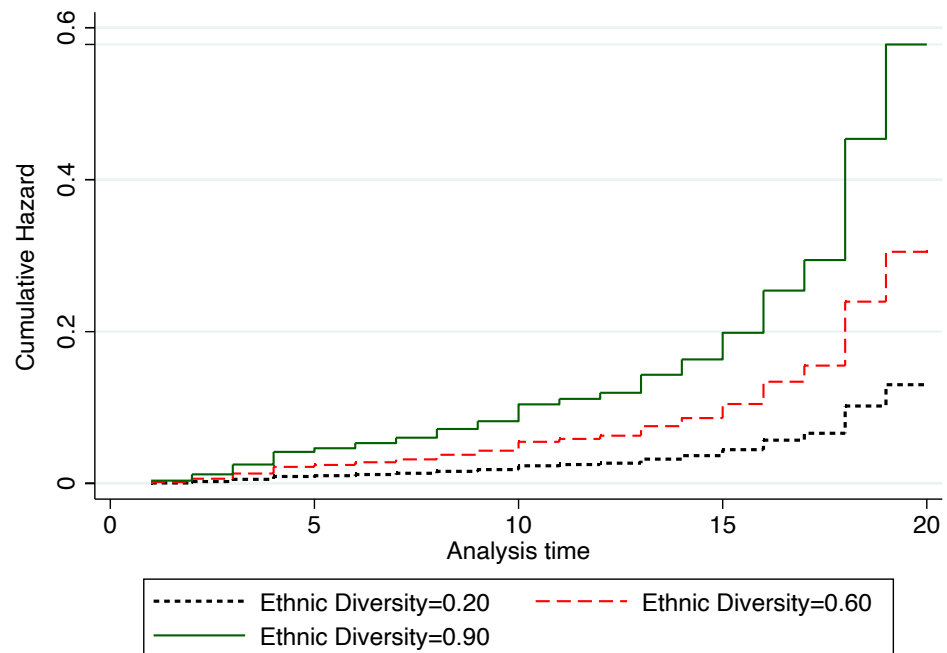


Figure 2: Cox proportional hazard regression: effect of ethnic diversity on the hazard of right-wing violence.

The state-level analysis first examines the appropriateness of proportional hazard models for analyzing the rate of right-wing violence. I began by estimating the flexible Cox proportional hazard model, which is useful because it makes no assumptions about the functional form of the baseline hazard, $\lambda_0(t)$.

Figure 2 examines the proportional hazard assumption that the effect of a covariate is proportionally related to its level. For heuristic purposes, I plotted the effect of entropy on the cumulative hazard of right-wing violence. As expected by H1, an increase in levels of diversity is proportionally related to a rising incidence of right-wing violence.

Although I used the nonparametric Cox model for diagnostic purposes, it has several drawbacks, including an inability to estimate whether there is an effect of time dependence. To remedy this, I also estimate the effects using a Weibull proportional hazard model, which includes a parameter that estimates whether the rate declines over time. The cumulative hazard plots and other diagnostics are consistent with the choice of Weibull model specifications, so I will focus on the parametric model results.

Results

Hypothesis H1 expected that right-wing violence would rise as ethnic diversity in a state increases. The results support this hypothesis, showing that more ethnically

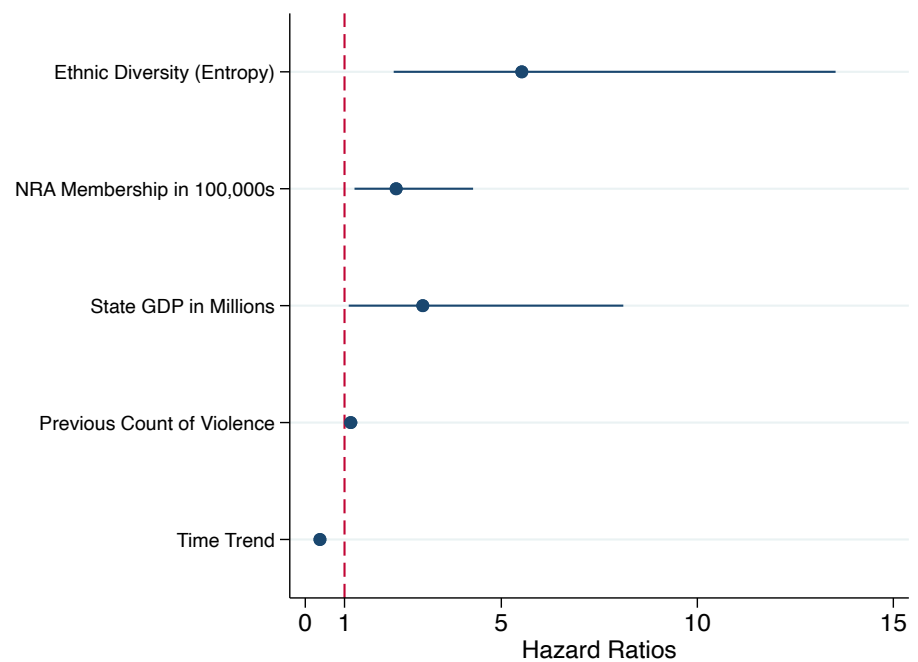


Figure 3: Effects on the hazard of right-wing violence in U.S. states, 2000 through 2018 (estimates from Table B1, column 2).

and racially diverse states had a significantly higher hazard of right-wing violence (see the online supplement, Table B1 in Appendix B).

For ease of interpretation, Figure 3 displays the hazard ratios (with a baseline of 1.0, indicating no effect) for several key variables. The hazard ratios for the three measures that are greater than one indicate that these measures increase the rate of right-wing violence: ethnic diversity, NRA membership, and state GDP. The time trend has a weakly negative effect (i.e., the hazard ratio falls below one). As expected, right-wing violence is path-dependent, as prior counts of violence increase the rate, albeit slightly.

The coefficients and corresponding hazard ratios for the full model with all measures can be found in Table B1 in the online supplement. The coefficient for the measure of diversity is 1.71, which indicates that if the ethnic diversity (entropy) index increased by just 0.10, the rate of right-wing violence would increase by more than 18 percent ($\text{exp. } (1.71 \times 0.10 = 1.186)$). As expected by theories of ethno-nationalism and ethnic competition, ethnic diversity is a key driver of right-wing violence.

NRA memberships are significantly associated with the growth in right-wing extremist violence in Figure 3. This result supports hypothesis H2. The estimated coefficient for NRA membership in Table B1 in the online supplement (0.866) tells us that an increase of just one standard deviation over the mean number of NRA members in a state would more than double the hazard of right-wing violence (the corresponding hazard ratio would be 2.79 when calculated at one standard

deviation higher than the mean). States with higher rates of membership in this organization also experienced more right-wing violence.¹⁰

Both local and statewide right-wing organizations appear to slightly decrease the hazard of right-wing violence (both hazard ratios are below 1.0), but these effects are not significant. These null findings regarding right-wing extremist organizations run counter to hypothesis H3 and to leading resource mobilization theories that expect social movements to benefit from having an organizational presence (Adamczyk et al. 2014). These results also do not support the claim there is an inverse relationship between organizational persistence and radical tactics (e.g., Michels 1911).

The Republican party has increasingly aligned itself with extremist right-wing views that can be classified as ethno-nationalist (Bonikowski 2017; Thompson 2021). In addition, the overlap between the cultural coalition of those with pro-gun rights attitudes with Republican party affiliation has increased in recent years (Joslyn et al. 2017; Lacombe 2019). Some scholars have argued that discourse led by elected politicians may be shaping the opinions and behaviors of their constituents by legitimating anti-immigrant views or by supporting gun rights campaigns (Bonikowski 2017; Mencken and Froese 2019). Moreover, politicians' speeches that refrain from condemning outbreaks of right-wing violence may also be effective in legitimating violence. A dramatic example of this comes from former President Trump's comment that there were "some very fine people on both sides" involved in the mob violence that took place in Charlottesville Virginia in 2017.

To capture the claim that a culture of ethno-nationalism encouraging right-wing violence will be nurtured when Republican officials are in power, the analysis includes two measures of Republican party success: Republican governor and Republican control of the legislature in a state. Hypotheses H4 and H5 find little support: although the effect of having a Republican governor or a Republican-controlled legislature shows a positive effect on the rate of right-wing violence, neither of these measures is significant.

Robustness Check: Hybrid Model of the Counts of Right-Wing Violence

The data on right-wing violence can also be analyzed as counts of events, arrayed over time. Some time ago, Paul Allison (2009) recommended a hybrid model that allows us to calculate the contribution of both fixed and random effects in the same model. Table B2 in Appendix B in the online supplement reports the results of this effort. Inspection of this hybrid model reveals evidence that the state differences in ethnic diversity and the number of right-wing organizations matter more than changes in the levels of these indicators within a given state. Given the differences in specifications between event-history and the hybrid models, it is not surprising that the hybrid model reports slightly different patterns when compared with the proportional hazard estimates.

However, it is impressive that the key measure of ethnic diversity is significant in the last column in the hybrid model. This means that states with more diversity

have higher rates of right-wing violence than states with less diversity but that states with increases in ethnic diversity over time do not have more violence.

Whereas in Figure 3 we see a positive effect of NRA membership in a state, the hybrid model does not report this measure as significant. In contrast, the hybrid model finds that states with more statewide right-wing extremist groups have more right-wing violence (see also Adamczyk et al. 2014). Although not conclusive, a comparison of the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) estimates suggests that the parametric specification of the Weibull model (Table B1 in the online supplement) performs better than the hybrid count model (Table B2 in the online supplement).

In sum, at the state level of analysis, using different estimations methods, we find support for the key hypothesized relationship between rates of right-wing violence and ethnic diversity. Hypothesis H2 also receives support from the preferred Weibull model, suggesting that states with increasing NRA memberships experience more right-wing violence. Hypothesis H3 regarding right-wing organizations finds no support. There is also no support for the claim from hypotheses H4 and H5 that allied Republican elites in power influence right-wing violence.

County-Level Analysis

As explained above, at the county level, right-wing extremist violence is relatively rare. When constructing a county-level data set, we see that most counties experience no violent right-wing events over this period, which means models using fixed effects would not be appropriate. The proportional hazard model that includes an estimate for time dependence would also be problematic. And as is often the case with sparse data, the count of events is overdispersed. In addition, counties are embedded in states, which requires a multilevel analysis. To gain some traction over these obstacles, I used a mixed-level negative binomial to estimate the effects of county- and state-level covariates on the counts of violence. Nevertheless, given the sparseness of these data, these results should be taken as suggestive.

Figure 4 plots the results of the county-level analysis of right-wing violence. As anticipated in hypothesis H1, increasing ethnic diversity has by far the strongest effect on the rate of violence, raising it about two and a half times. The effect of a state's greater NRA membership is greater than one, but this effect is not significant. Previous counts of violence are associated with subsequent right-wing violence, but not significantly. Contrast the positive association of state-level GDP with right-wing violence (Figure 3) with the negative and statistically significant association of county-level GDP with right-wing violence in a county (Figure 4). One possible explanation consistent with both findings is that in wealthier states, economic inequality among counties fuels anger that leads to higher levels of right-wing violence.

As we saw in the analysis of right-wing violence in states, at the county level, there is no support for hypothesis H3 that expected states with a greater number of right-wing organizations to have more right-wing violence. In addition, in Figure 4, we see that the incidence ratio for NRA membership is positive, but this effect is not statistically significant. Of course, county-level membership rates in the NRA

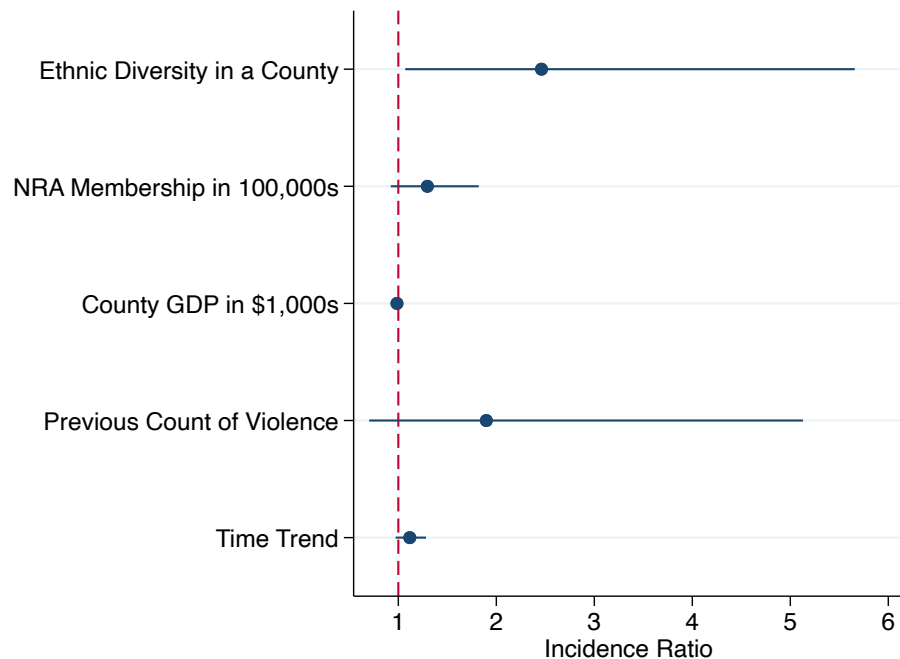


Figure 4: Effects on the counts of right-wing violence in U.S. counties, 2000 through 2018 (estimates from Table B3).

would be more precise, but these data are only available at the state level. There seems to be little effect of right-wing organizations on violence in a county.¹¹ Thus, the findings at the county level run counter to Hypotheses H3, H4, and H5.¹²

That so few characteristics were systematically related to the incidence of right-wing violence at the county level deserves some discussion. One consideration is that information on right-wing violence from the ECDB identifies only the location of the event, which does not tell us about the residence, background, or organizational involvement of the perpetrators. However, events that attract participants from other regions tend to be large-scale right-wing events. These are very rare events, such as those that took place on January 6, 2021, or in Charlottesville in 2017. In other words, the county-level analysis identifies the local characteristics of places that act as magnets for right-wing violence.

The analysis of right-wing violence in counties involves counts of violence spread over more than three thousand counties in the United States. As mentioned earlier, the county-level results shown here should be taken with caution. At the same time, using a variety of methods, it is striking that higher levels of ethnic diversity are significantly associated with a greater chance that a county or a state will experience right-wing violence.

Limitations and Caveats

There are several limitations to this study, as there are in all studies. First, the data on right-wing groups covered a relatively brief 19-year interval, which may reflect

anomalies in the politics and dynamics of the right-wing movement that are specific to this period. These years had two quite different Republican administrations (Bush and Trump) and two consecutive Democratic terms (Obama). Even though the analysis covers a relatively short period, this study is the only one I found that analyzes data on right-wing violence and organizations that have been updated through the year 2018.

Second, as mentioned above, although the sparseness of data on right-wing violence at the county level was an obstacle in the county-level analysis, this shortcoming invites researchers to extend the observation period or expand the scope of the analysis to different countries. As more data become available, the implications of ethno-nationalism for various social movements could be examined with more precision.

The sparseness of data on counts of right-wing violence is less of a problem in the state-level analyses. Yet even in the state-level analyses, we see some unexpected results, including the absence of any effect of the number of statewide right-wing extremist organizations on the hazard of right-wing violence. Why would this be the case? Some theories suggest there are trade-offs between the activities associated with maintaining extremist organizations and acts of violence, but I did not find an inverse relationship between right-wing organizations and violence either.

There may be a simpler explanation for these null findings regarding right-wing organizations: not all right-wing extremist organizations promote violence (although some do). Some right-wing organizations—especially those with a broad statewide scope—may seek to attract support from more centrist-minded citizens who would shy away from violent organizations. Even extremely violent organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan may be evolving into an organization engaged in more social activities. The annual family-friendly picnic gathering of the Klan at Stone Mountain is a case in point (McVeigh and Estep 2019). More detailed evidence on the specific activities and tactics of each of these right-wing organizations would help sort out this issue.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article offers a cohesive perspective on right-wing violence that integrates ideas from theories of ethno-nationalism, group threat, and social movements. Guided by these perspectives, I expected and found that an increase in ethnic diversity is systematically associated with more right-wing violence. I also found a generally positive association between a state's level of NRA membership and right-wing violence. These results are consistent with claims that there is a broad cultural and ideological movement associated with ethnic nationalism that is in part driven by an ideology that views ethnic diversity as a threat and promotes an American gun culture.

It might be useful to compare the findings reported here with previous studies of right-wing violence. Similar to Nemeth and Hansen's (2022) analysis, in the county-level analysis, I found women's labor force participation rate decreased right-wing violence (but not significantly so). The reasons for this discrepancy are many: Nemeth and Hansen (2022) analyze right-wing violence over the 1970-to-2016 pe-

riod, whereas I analyze only the years 2000 through 2018. In their county-level analysis, Nemeth and Hansen (2022) code the dependent variable dichotomously, whereas I use the raw count of events at the county level. In my analysis, I hypothesized and found significant effects of NRA memberships at the state (but not at the county level), whereas Nemeth and Hansen (2022) did not include this measure. Finally, I included a more theoretically precise measure of ethnic diversity (entropy), whereas Nemeth and Hansen (2022) included an aggregate measure of “nonwhite proportion.”

Unlike the results shown here, Adamczyk et al. (2014) did not find a significant effect of ethnic diversity, but it is relevant that they reported positive effects of Muslim and Jewish congregations on right-wing violence at the county level. These authors report no significant effect of poverty on right-wing violence, which is counter to the negative effect of county-level GDP on violence reported here. In contrast to the null findings for SPLC right-wing extremist organizations reported here, Adamczyk et al. (2014) report a positive effect of the number of SPLC hate groups on the rate of violence. Many differences in specifications could contribute to these differences: Adamczyk et al. (2014) estimated a logit model of right-wing violence in a county that compared just two periods, whereas I measure the count of violent events at the county level annually. In addition, I used event-history techniques to analyze the rate of violence at the state level.

Although policy recommendations are outside of the scope of this article, it is tempting to speculate what the findings reported here might imply for policies designed to reduce violence. First, the effect of NRA membership levels at the state level suggests that the success of this organization in part reflects a state’s cultural environment that is compatible with ethnic nationalism (Bonikowski et al. 2021; Lacombe 2019). The findings reported here showed an association between ethno-nationalist sentiment and attitudes supporting the American gun culture, which is also consistent with this view. However, the decline (and financial problems) of this organization may eventually undermine the mutual benefits enjoyed by both the NRA and right-wing political activity. Continued financial distress and court rulings filed against the NRA may eventually reduce right-wing violence.

Second and somewhat surprisingly, my results show no systematic influence of right-wing organizations identified by the SPLC on rates of right-wing violence. An unexplored explanation for this null finding may be that right-wing violent events are more likely to be committed by “lone-wolf” suspects, whose ideologies are shaped by dark internet websites and groups rather than by membership in an organization that meets face-to-face (Conway et al. 2019). Because of their clandestine nature, weak and perhaps intermittent internet affiliations with right-wing extremist groups would be difficult to trace, but an investigation of individuals’ connections to these websites may be a useful thread to follow in the future.

Third, the findings suggest that acts of right-wing violence analyzed here are not necessarily a function of absolute levels of economic deprivation. Instead, I found that states with higher GDPs were significantly more likely to experience violence but that counties with higher GDPs were less likely to experience right-wing violence. This pattern suggests that local-level economic distress may play a role in wealthier states. These results are also consistent with McVeigh and his

colleagues' arguments that emphasize the loss of status or economic standing as key triggers of right-wing violence.

Although it is too early to predict whether the number of right-wing groups will continue to decline, the potential for more right-wing violence in the United States has not disappeared. If the Southern Poverty Law Center is correct in its assessment, right-wing extremist groups are responsible for an increasing percentage of attacks on various marginalized identities. At this writing (December 2022) ethno-nationalism seems to be thriving. This suggests that policymakers would do well to confront fears associated with ethnic and racial diversity in regions experiencing a decisive shift away from ethnic homogeneity. Such changes in demographics appear to be fertile ground for right-wing violence. Over time it may become increasingly important to explain why right-wing violence has become a dramatic manifestation of ethno-nationalism in the United States.

Notes

- 1 Miller (2017:6) defines left-wing violence in the START-ECDB data set as "Violence in support of a revolutionary socialist agenda and the view that one is a protector of the populace. Characterized by disdain for capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, and by a Marxist political focus and pro-communist/socialist beliefs, or support for a decentralized, non-hierarchical sociopolitical system (e.g., anarchism)."
- 2 For a review of benefits derived from establishing right-wing organizations, see Adamczyk et al. (2014).
- 3 I thank Doug McAdam for reminding me of the relevance of this tradition.
- 4 Recent research suggests there may be a growing association between affiliation with evangelical religion and support for right-wing politics (Gorski and Perry 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020; but see Smith and Adler 2022).
- 5 As Fox and Guglielmo (2012) and Olzak and Shanahan (2014) show, the late-nineteenth-century surge in immigration by foreign-born Whites and migration northward of Blacks corresponded with waves of hostility and violence directed against these groups. Other outcomes of the period of rising diversity included instituting deportation laws (as in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act), national quotas, and the disproportionate incarceration of minorities.
- 6 Bonikowski et al. (2021:510–511) provide evidence on this point using content-analyzed media reports and campaign speeches. With national-level reporting, such reports would not vary across state or county boundaries and are less relevant for the present analyses.
- 7 I also investigated if the absolute number of policies restricting gun use in a state had an effect. It did not. I then explored a national-level time series of policy moods on firearms policies in the United States that focuses specifically on gun control policy, provided by the Policy Agendas Project (see Steidley 2018). Unfortunately, these data are available only at the national level. To my knowledge, no public opinion polling on right-wing violence, gun policy, or liberal ideologies is available at the state level for all 50 states over this period.
- 8 Nemeth and Hansen (2022) also found a significant and positive effect of district-level political competition (painstakingly mapped onto county boundaries), measured in terms of close electoral results. My analysis did not find any significant results for this

measure, and so it was dropped from the analysis (and its omission did not affect other results).

- 9 Recent research has been successful in employing coarsened exact matching (cem) methods to overcome well-known obstacles that arise when making causal inferences using observational data (e.g., Morgan and Winship 2015; Negro, Kovács, and Carroll 2022; Olzak 2021). The cem technique cannot be used here because the cem-weights require constant weights for each unit. Other alternatives such as instrumental variables were explored, but no evidence of endogeneity was uncovered. For an example of another estimation technique used here, see the online supplement, Table B2.
- 10 Using data on household firearms compiled from 51 surveys by Rand researchers (Schell et al. 2020), I initially included a measure of the percentage of households with firearms. I found that this measure was correlated 0.67 with NRA membership, as many would expect. When I replace the measure of NRA membership with the firearms measure, the percentage of households having firearms in a state is equally positive and significant in the model.
- 11 I also investigated whether counties located in states with Republican governors, or with Republican-led legislatures, affect the rate of right-wing violence. These measures had no effect, and including or excluding them did not affect any other results. These measures were dropped from the county-level analysis.
- 12 The absence of significant results for state-level covariates in the county-level analysis prompted me to replicate the results shown here using the negative binomial panel specification (xtnbreg) in Stata 17 by including only the county-level covariates. As might be expected, the results are similar: for example, using the mixed-level negative binomial specification (menbreg) the incidence ratio for ethnic diversity is 2.53, and it is 2.49 using xtnbreg.

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