**Political Competition and Right-Wing Terrorism:**

**A County-Level Analysis of the United States**

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Abstract: While many previous studies on US right-wing violence center on factors such as racial threat and economic anxiety, we draw from comparative politics research linking electoral dynamics to anti-minority violence. Further, we argue that the causes of right-wing terrorism do not solely rest on political, economic, or social changes individually, but on their interaction. Using a geocoded, US county-level analysis of right-wing terrorist incidents from 1970-2016, we find no evidence that poorer or more diverse counties are targets of right-wing terrorism. Rather, right-wing violence is more common in areas where “playing the ethnic card” make strategic sense for elites looking to shift electoral outcomes: counties that are in electorally competitive areas and that are predominantly white.

In its *2020 Homeland Threat Assessment*, the Department of Homeland Security identified domestic violent extremists, specifically white supremacists, as “the most persistent and lethal threat” to the United States (DHS 2020, 18). Part of the broader family of right-wing terrorism, this form of terrorism has become the most prevalent form of terrorism in the US over the past few decades.[[1]](#endnote-1) The Center for Investigative Reporting identified 201 attacks and foiled plots carried out by domestic actors in the US between 2008 and 2016, finding that 115 cases were carried out by right-wing extremists versus 63 that were motivated by Islamist ideology (Neiwert 2017).[[2]](#endnote-2) Right-wing terrorists are also lethal, responsible for 251 fatalities on US soil compared to 90 by Islamists (START 2017).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Despite the relative frequency and lethality of this form of political violence within the US, research on this topic has a more extensive pedigree in the fields of sociology, criminology, psychology, and economics than in political science. As a result, the extant theory on right-wing terrorism primarily focuses on individual- or organizational-level motivations. Past research has examined the relationship between the perpetrator and victim (Parkin and Freilich 2015), perceptions of racial threat (Durso and Jacobs 2013; LaFree and Bersani 2014), or on identifying economic triggers of radicalization (Blazak 2001; Michel and Herbeck 2002). Other scholars analyze the internal operations of right-wing extremist groups, including work by Chermak et al. (2013) and Asal et al. (2020) comparing violent and nonviolent groups.

We seek to extend this research by arguing that right-wing terrorism is responsive to environmental cues and more specifically, to the political environment. After all, right-wing terrorism can be defined as:

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. [It is] 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 to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty (Miller 2017, 1-2).

Therefore, right-wing terrorism is a response to political fears as much as cultural and/or racial ones, and thus should have strong political causes. We draw from research on anti-minority violence in other countries to argue that electoral competition creates incentives for politicians to use exclusionary, threat-based rhetoric to mobilize voters, which in turn increases perceptions of political threat in right-wing adherents and normalizes violence as an acceptable political activity. And, while national politics may play some role in shaping this competitive environment, we argue that local political competition is the more important factor. We therefore follow the lead of some recent scholars in examining the incidence of right-wing terrorist activity at the US county-level (Adamczyk et al. 2014; Freilich et al. 2015; LaFree and Bersani 2014), an approach that yields both theoretical and empirical benefits.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Finally, while many studies of U.S. right-wing terrorism treat potential demographic, economic, or political causes as if they operate in isolation from one another, we contend that electoral motivations for terrorism are dependent upon demographic trends. After all, research on racial attitudes within the US generally finds that the impact of diversity is conditioned upon an individual’s socioeconomic and political environments (see for instance Branton and Jones 2005; Campbell et al. 2006; Oliver and Mendelberg 2000). We extend this logic to right-wing terrorism, arguing that the triggers for right-wing violence do not rest on political, economic, or social changes individually, but on their interaction.

**WHAT WE KNOW (AND DON’T KNOW) ABOUT RIGHT-WING TERRORISM**

In examining the motivations for right-wing political violence, a considerable literature explores the experiences and conditions that mobilize individuals to join extremist groups or parties. Right-wing movements are generally noted as reactive or “threat-based” (Cunningham 2012, 299), and those who become radicalized frequently express feelings of alienation, anger, and general discontent (Kaplan 1995; Horgan 2008; Blee and Creasap 2010). One approach - frequently shared by media and policy-makers - is to focus on perceptions of racial threat, social disorganization, and identity shifts. Knigge (1998, 271), for instance, notes that support for extreme right-wing parties and their philosophies of xenophobia and ethnic nationalism finds its roots in “a crisis of national identity...brought about by the transformation into a multicultural society.” Right-wing violence in the U.S. also has a gender component, with women a frequent target (Nice 1988; Freilich and Pridemore 2007; Perliger 2012). Under this logic, right-wing violence represents a “competitive backlash” against the social uncertainty created by multiculturalism and women’s empowerment. Adherence to right-wing nationalism, and its hard division between in-groups and out-groups, becomes a means for individuals to regain a sense of control (LaFree and Bersani 2014).

The rhetoric of right-wing extremists and hate groups in the US certainly fits a social anxiety story, as it emphasizes the victimization of the traditionally dominant white Christian male, with empowered women, minorities, and immigrants becoming the villains (Ferber 1998; Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Weinberg 2013). However, the underlying assumption of this approach - that increasing diversity or gender empowerment directly contributes to uncertainty and therefore violence - is fundamentally flawed. There is no empirical support for the claim that increased diversity leads to greater violence in the US or internationally (Posner 2006; Piazza 2006; Chandra and Wilkinson 2008; Piazza 2017),[[5]](#endnote-5) and studies on the relationship between women’s empowerment and right-wing violence have yielded mixed results.[[6]](#endnote-6)

One reason for these weak and inconsistent findings may be that a purely identity-based explanation reverses the causal direction between multiculturalism, social anxiety, and right-wing identity. A number of experimental studies find that exposing white participants to news about the US’s growing minority population leads these individuals to be more hostile towards minorities and more in favor of policies and politicians who they perceive as safeguarding white privilege (Outten et al. 2012; Craig and Richeson 2014). However, this pattern only holds true for those who already have a strong attachment to white identity (Major et al. 2018). In other words, diversity only becomes anxiety-inducing for those who have been previously primed to see it as such.

The scholarly focus, therefore, has turned in other directions. Research on the organizational characteristics of right wing groups finds that violent groups differ significantly in capacity, structure, and culture from non-violent ones. Larger and older organizations are more likely to use violence, as are ones with alliances to other extremist groups, decentralized structures, those led by charismatic leaders, and those that adhere to supremacist ideology (Chermak et al. 2013; Asal et al. 2020). Other studies have sought to disaggregate the type of violence carried out by these groups, noting that the victims of ideologically-motivated and non-ideological attacks differ in their background and social closeness to the perpetrator (Parkin and Freilich 2015). While this work has been useful in answering the “who” questions in terrorism research, it is more limited in answering “when” and “where” terrorist violence is likely to occur.

To identify at-risk locations, other scholars return to the “threat-based” explanation for right-wing violence, but re-focus on economic and political factors that may trigger the feelings of anger, alienation, and dissatisfaction so endemic in right-wing ideology. Some theorists drawn from the logic of Gurr’s (1970) relative deprivation theory, arguing that support for right-wing extremism and a willingness to use violence is linked to the cognitive stress created when an individual’s expectation for their economic, political, and/or social well-being exceeds current realities. Violence may emerge if individuals compare and attribute the cause of this disconnect to an outside reference group.

Economic transformations may contribute to this cognitive stress by creating economic winners and losers. Those who feel left behind economically - those who are unemployed, low skilled, or those who may become unemployed in the near future - are most likely to express fear that these transformations are unraveling traditional ways of life (Betz 1994; Ezekiel 1995). For these individuals, support for right-wing extremism becomes a way to arrest this change and return society to what they view as a better, earlier state of relations (Minkenberg 2003). Financial hardship may further serve to ostracize individuals and increase feelings of social isolation (Michel and Herbeck 2002; Perliger 2012), making these individuals even more susceptible to extremist rhetoric and radicalization attempts.

Right-wing groups certainly recognize the benefit of declining economics in expanding their membership. Skinhead groups target recruitment efforts towards areas experiencing job loss (Blazak 2001), and membership in right-wing organizations is higher in areas that have seen significant job loss or economic restructuring (Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Wilkinson 2011; Durso and Jacobs 2013). However, we must be cautious in drawing analogies: joining a right-wing organization does not automatically lead someone to commit violence, and only some groups engage in violence (Asal et al. 2020). Furthermore, cross-national studies have failed to find a consistent linkage between economics and terrorist activity (see Abadie 2004, Piazza 2006), and research on right-wing terrorism in the US has similarly yielded weak results.[[7]](#endnote-7)

 Other scholars focus on an alternative source of grievances: national and local politics. Individual-level support for right-wing politics rests more on distrust of the political regime rather than on economic frustrations (Knigge 1998), so it is unsurprising that right-wing militia and white supremacist groups in the US express strong anti-government and anti-federal sentiments (Blazak 2001; Michel and Herbeck, 2002; Perliger 2012). Disillusionment with the government is a key element of right-wing ideology, and may play a role in radicalization. In fact, the belief that governments are failing to protect “legitimate citizens” may be what motivates right-wing radicals to switch from low-level activities towards systemic terrorism (Sprinzak 1995; Kerodal et al. 2015).[[8]](#endnote-8) This disillusionment, however, may have little connection to what the government actually does. For instance, right-wing rhetoric often centers around allegations of federal government overreach or criticisms of tax policy, yet there is no link between taxation levels and right-wing violence.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Instead, right-wing violence may depend less on what the government does than on who controls it. In line with disillusionment predictions, one strand of research contends that right-wing violence emerges when extremists feel ignored by politicians and frustrated by a lack of political achievements (Risen and Thomas 1998; Hewitt 2003). As a result, right-wing terrorist attacks should increase when the political party representing their opponents - more recently, the Democratic party - makes political gains (Olzak 1992, Piazza 2017). Others argue that right-wing violence is instead empowered by the success of ideologically similar politicians, as these elite open political opportunities, provide resources, or normalize rhetoric in a way that empowers extremist actors (Gilliard-Matthews 2011; O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Van Dyke and Soule 2002).

**POLITICAL COMPETITION AND RIGHT-WING ESCALATION**

We contend, however, that it is not the fear of losing political control but the nature of political contestation that drives right-wing terrorism. In addition, we argue that local political dynamics shape the risk of right-wing terrorism. Ethnic competition theory emphasizes that “conflicts and protests are likely to be as sensitive - if not more sensitive - to competition at the *local* level” (Olzak 1992, 37), and research on terrorism in the US and abroad supports a strong local connection in terms of motivations (Laryš and Mareš 2011; Adamczyk et al. 2014; Koehler 2016; Nemeth et al. 2014; Piazza 2017).[[10]](#endnote-10) Local conditions and personal experiences resonate more than national trends for those committing right-wing violence (Blazak 2001), and membership in right-wing groups is sensitive to changes in local competition (Cunningham and Phillips 2007; Cunningham 2012). Furthermore, most terrorists carry out attacks geographically close to where they live (Gill et al. 2019; Marchment et al. 2020), meaning that right-wing terrorists are not only motivated by local dynamics, they launch their attacks “close to home.”

As for which localities are more prone to terrorism, conflict scholars have noted a link between elections and political violence,[[11]](#endnote-11) and right-wing violence tends to be higher in regions with more intense political party competition (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Bauman and Leech 2012). Wilkinson’s (2004) theory regarding the electoral incentives for anti-minority violence may be especially useful in understanding the causal logics linking electoral competition to right-wing terrorism in the US.[[12]](#endnote-12) Politicians facing a close election seek out strategies to mobilize key constituencies. Fearing a possible loss, some politicians may invoke racial symbolism as a strategy to motivate their supporters (Mendelberg 2001; Eifert et al. 2010). When politicians “play the race/ethnic card,” it creates “discursive opportunities” for a right-wing message to enter the public discourse (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). More extreme rhetoric becomes normalized, and individuals who are already predisposed to aggression may begin to view violence as socially acceptable. While many U.S. politicians rely on subtle cues in their political dialogue (Mendelberg 2001), individuals exposed to even “mild violent metaphors” are more likely to support political violence against opposing groups than those exposed to more neutral messages (Kalmoe 2014, 553).

Once the rhetoric has been introduced, other elite claiming to represent a demographic majority may magnify and expand this initial message. Some local elite may use “polarizing antiminority events” to strengthen majority ethnic/racial identification and trigger a minority response, “preferably a violent countermobilization that can be portrayed as threatening to the majority” (Wilkinson 2004, 4), mobilizing the majority into action. Even if a politician chooses a subtle message, local right-wing groups might amplify any exclusionary message. This rhetoric becomes reinforced, increasing the belief by right-wing adherents that political violence is not only necessary, but acceptable. This logic of rhetorical normalization may help explain why in the US, right-wing extremist groups had a longer organizational life span in purple states (Suttmoeller et al. 2015), and why hate groups that pass out leaflets or engage in “public legitimacy” events are more likely to engage in violence (Chermak et al. 2013).

While a politician’s intent may be to encourage voting rather than violence, feeding perceptions of out-group threat reinforces fears of outgroup political gains and increases the risk that extremists will act out in response to these fears. Competitive elections create uncertainty, which can be anxiety-inducing for voters. Populations that view political contestation as a zero-sum game may be even more likely to act out against outgroups they perceive as threatening their control over policy. And in many ways, right-wing extremists may be more prone to perceive politics in this manner: they have a greater tendency to disengage and reject mainstream politics (O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Perliger 2012), and they are more prone to ethnocentrism. As a result, these individuals are less likely to trust that democratic institutions will constrain opposing groups, and are more likely to see political violence as necessary to maintain their influence.[[13]](#endnote-13) For this reason, we predict:

**Hypothesis 1**: *Localities with greater electoral competition are at higher risk of right-wing terrorism.*

At the same time, not all politicians rely on such divisive tactics to win elections, even in the face of stiff competition. This may be due to a candidate’s personal morality, but some of this choice may be strategic. Wilkinson (2004) points out that anti-minority rhetoric can be a double-edged sword; it is a deeply polarizing political tool that risks alienating not only the target minority, but also more moderate voters within their social group. Since “we would not expect politicians to emphasize identities that would...result in support of too small of a percentage of the electorate to win the election” (22), it stands to reason that in the US, elites should primarily use anti-minority rhetoric in white-majority areas. Furthermore, this interactive logic also follows predictions from intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954; Oliver and Wong 2003): whites in predominantly white regions may be isolated from contact with minorities, meaning that their only perception of the opposing group is based on elite cues. Whites in regions with larger nonwhite populations, in contrast, are more likely to have personal interactions with outgroups. This helps reduce perceptions of outgroup threat, which in turn undermines the viability of a threat rhetoric strategy. As a result:

**Hypothesis 2**: *Localities with greater electoral competition and a smaller non-white population are at higher risk of right-wing terrorism.*

This hypothesis is in line with work suggesting that intergroup contact needs a critical mass to work effectively (Schlueter and Scheepers 2010), but notably runs counter to “racial threat” or “ethnic polarization” arguments, which instead predicts more terrorism in the presence of large or growing minority populations. While shifting demographics may inspire other types of right-wing activities,[[14]](#endnote-14) our electoral dependence-contact logic helps explain why Piazza (2017) finds no link between a growing non-white population and right-wing terrorism in US states.

**DATA AND METHODS**

While some studies of right-wing terrorism examine trends at the national- or state-level (Perliger 2012; Piazza 2017), we use US counties as our level of analysis. Counties better capture community-level dynamics than do larger geographic units (Adamczyk et al. 2014; LaFree and Bersani 2014), and there is evidence that many right-wing adherents are “more susceptible to structural, cultural, and communal characteristics on the county-level as opposed to either the state-level or a smaller ecological level” (Freilich et al. 2015, 390). Most relevant to our study, right-wing movements are most active politically at the county-level (McVeigh and Cunningham 2012), and thus should be most sensitive to dynamics at this level. We therefore construct a dataset of all US counties from 1970 to 2016, resulting in 150,847 county-years.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**Dependent Variable**

Our dependent variable indicates whether a county experienced at least one act of right-wing terrorism during a given year. While some scholars have analyzed hate crimes and terrorism together when studying right-wing violence, the motivations behind these forms of violence significantly differ (LaFree & Dugan, 2004), as do their causal triggers (Deloughery et al. 2012). While hate crimes may be viewed as more spontaneous actions driven by personal biases, terrorist attacks are generally premeditated actions carried out with the hope of achieving a social or political goal. Therefore, to limit our analysis to terrorist incidents, we use terrorist event data from the from the START “Ideological Motivations of Terrorism in the United States, 1970-2016” dataset (Miller 2017). As this dataset is drawn from the GTD, it only includes incidents if the action fulfills at least two of three criteria: it is directed towards a political, economic, religious, or social goal; there is evidence of an intent to coerce, intimidate, or convey a message to an audience beyond the initial victims; and/or the action is outside the realm of legitimate warfare activities.[[16]](#endnote-16) Given the controversial nature of the terrorist group label, we believe this criteria - based on the nature of the act rather than the targets or the perpetrators - helps us better capture the distinction between terrorism and other forms of violence right-wing groups may conduct.

Miller’s (2017) data classifies US terrorist attacks into acts by environmental, left-wing, religious, nationalist/separatist, and single-issue perpetrators. We limit our analyses to acts perpetrated by right-wing extremists,[[17]](#endnote-17) which results in 353 attacks over our time frame.[[18]](#endnote-18) The geographic distribution of these attacks is displayed in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

We choose to code our dependent variable as dichotomous rather than a count for several reasons. First, we focus on the general occurrence of right-wing terrorism rather than severity, meaning a dichotomous coding would be a better fit to our predictions. In addition, the distribution of attacks approximates a dichotomous variable: 99.87% of our county-years experienced no attacks, 0.11% suffered one attack, and 0.02% had more than one attack.[[19]](#endnote-19) We lose very little information by using a logit, and a dichotomous variable allows us to minimize the influence of outliers. As a robustness check, we run an alternative model using a count version of this variable (see Appendix B), which yields similar results.

**Independent Variables**

To measure *election competition*, we assess presidential election returns from 1970 to 2016, measured at the US Congressional district-level, using data from the Constituency-Level Elections Archives (Kollman et al. 2019). Using presidential elections as our measure of overall local competitiveness has many advantages. While the US federal system results in a fairly continuous election cycle, presidential election years represent periods of heightened electoral competition. Presidential elections also have the highest turnout, they are always contested, and they are highly salient to voters. Presidential term limits also minimize the impact of incumbent advantage, which may distort assessments of electoral competitiveness in lower-level elections (especially in states with no term limits on state legislators or governors). As a result, we might consider presidential elections a good proxy measure for a region’s potential political competition.

As for why we use Congressional district-level results, due to the nature of the US electoral college, most voters are aware if their state is a “purple” (competitive) or a “safe” state. At the same time, previous work on right-wing movements suggest that these individuals are most susceptible to county-level forces (McVeigh and Cunningham 2012; Freilich et al. 2015). In other words, while the average person may be more aware of state-level presidential election competition, right-wing groups may be most likely to mobilize with divisive rhetoric or actions in response to county-level (not state-level) election results. We use Congressional district-level results as a way to balance these two considerations, but run alternative models in Appendix B that use state-level and county-level presidential election competitiveness to test for any potential bias introduced by this choice.

 To calculate *electoral competition*, we take the absolute difference in a district’s vote share for Democratic and Republican Presidential candidates and subtract this value from 1. Higher values represent more electorally competitive areas. To match each Congressional district - and its election results - to a US county, we use information available from the United States Congressional District Shapefiles Project (Lewis, DeVine, Pritcher, and Martis 2013). We overlay these district maps over a map of US counties, repeating this process with a new map each Congressional election year.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In Hypothesis 2, we theorize that the effect of electoral competition is dependent upon county racial demographics. Our county-level racial data are based on the intercensal population data available through the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Bureau of Economic Research.[[21]](#endnote-21) To account for the different racial categories used in different census waves, we create a variable measuring a county’s *percent non-white population*.[[22]](#endnote-22) To test Hypothesis 2’s proposed interaction, we multiply the *percent non-white population* variable with *electoral competition*.

**Control Variables**

To assess whether right-wing terrorism is linked to conditions of economic stress, we use Woods and Poole Economics, Inc. (2018) yearly data on a county’s gross regional product (GRP) divided by the county’s intercensal population to generate *GRP per capita*. GRP is calculated based on the “proportion of total state earnings of employees originating in a particular county” (Woods and Poole 2018, 24). To account for outliers, we log this variable. We also multiply this with our race variable to see if economics interacts with race, similar to our hypothesized relationship with political competition.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Since presidential elections can be more divisive and competitive than other elections, we include a dichotomous *election year* variable coded as 1 for those years. To control for gender dynamics, we include *female labor force participation* (World Bank 2019).[[24]](#endnote-24) To address the debate on whether right-wing terrorism is triggered by extremists lashing out at ideological opponents or being emboldened by permissive politicians, we include a dichotomous variable, *Democratic Presidency*, which is coded as a 1 if the president that year was a Democrat.[[25]](#endnote-25) We use an annual *liberal state citizen ideology* measure from Berry et al. (1998) to assess whether right-wing attacks occur in more ideologically supportive or resistant states. These scores range from 0 to 100, with higher values representing a more liberal citizenry.

Piazza (2017) finds that more populated states are more at risk of right-wing terrorism, so we control for a county’s *total population* using the same sources as our race variable. Since right-wing terrorists often come from and are more active in rural areas (Handler 1990; Hewitt 2003; Kimmel and Ferber 2000), we calculate the *percent urban population* by taking a county’s urban population and dividing it by the county’s total population.[[26]](#endnote-26) As these data are only available every ten years, we interpolate to fill in the missing years.[[27]](#endnote-27) Both variables are logged.

Since geographically larger counties may be more difficult to police, we control for *county land area* using data from the US Censuses of Agriculture (Haines et al. 2018). Again, we log this variable. Following Webb and Cutter’s (2009) finding that right-wing terrorist activity has occurred with greater frequency in the Midwest and Northeast, we include three dichotomous variables used by the US Census Bureau denoting the major regions of the US: *Midwest*, *South*, and *West*, with *Northeast* serving as the reference category.

To account for temporal autocorrelation, we include cubic polynomials of time (Carter and Signorino 2010), but omit the reporting of these variables in our tables to conserve space. For spatial autocorrelation, we include a spatial lag of attacks. This is constructed as the number of contiguous counties experiencing a right-wing terrorist attack divided by the total number of contiguous counties. For our analyses, we use a mixed effects logistic regression, which “permits the analysis of repeated measures (i.e. longitudinal data) that also have a hierarchy of meaningful levels (i.e. nested data)” (Bailard 2015, 329). This technique uses random and fixed effects to estimate within- and across-group variance.[[28]](#endnote-28) The fixed effect component of our model allows us to determine how county-level factors affect the likelihood of right-wing terrorism over time while the random effects component accounts for unobserved variance at the state level.

Lastly, all of our independent and control variables, except for *democratic president* and *election year*, are lagged by one year to control for possible endogeneity. A descriptive statistics table with all our variables can be found in Appendix A.

**RESULTS**

Our results are presented in Table 1. In Model 1, we run our analysis without our main theoretical variables. Model 2 introduces our independent variables with no interactions, while Models 3 through 5 include the interaction terms.

[Insert Table 1 here]

As we predict in Hypothesis 1, we consistently find that right-wing terrorism is more likely to occur in areas of greater electoral competition. To better investigate the substantive effects of this variable (and our other significant variables), we calculate the marginal effects and then use these to estimate the change in probability a cell experiences at least one terrorist attack when compared to the baseline risk of terrorism. As seen in Table 2, increasing electoral competition by one standard deviation increases the risk that a county will experience a terrorist attack between 21 (Model 4) and 32% (Model 3).

[Insert Table 2 here]

In Hypothesis 2, we predict that electoral competition would pose the highest risk when the non-white population comprised a small proportion of a county’s total population. Given that interactions between continuous variables are difficult to interpret based solely on their coefficients (due to the possible nonlinear nature of their relationships), we plot the marginal effects of the interaction terms from Model 5 (see Brambor et al. 2006). The interaction terms from Model 5 are presented in Figures 2 and 3. To interpret these results, each solid line represents the effect on right-wing terrorism given a one-unit increase in either electoral competition (Figure 2) or GRP per capita (Figure 3) at different non-white proportions in a county. The dotted lines represent the 95% confidence interval. The relationship is significant if the upper and lower bounds of the confidence intervals exclude zero. If above the line, the constituent term represents an increasing risk of attack, while those below represent a decreasing risk. We only display the results for counties between 0 and 50% non-white because very few US counties have a non-white population comprising more than 50% of their total population (see Appendix A), and thus our results fail to reach significance for those counties.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

While county race demographics have no *independent* effect,[[29]](#endnote-29) we find that increasing electoral competitiveness heightens the risk of an attack if the non-white population in a county is less than about 27 percent - in other words, areas of white racial dominance. As Figure 2 shows, this risk increases as the non-white proportion decreases, a finding in line with the electoral strategy logic detailed in our theory.

Turning to our control variables, we find that wealthier counties - those with a higher GRP per capita - are at a higher risk of right-wing attack. In addition, Figure 3 suggests that county racial dynamics has little impact on this relationship. This runs counter to previous studies that link racial competition over scarce economic resources to right-wing violence. While economic scarcity may still play a role in right-wing recruitment, it appears that it is economic affluence, not scarcity, that drives the choice of right-wing attack locations.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

We find no evidence that presidential election years are associated with a greater risk of right-wing terrorism. This differs from Perliger (2012) and from cross-national work identifying national elections as periods of heightened ethnic relations (Eifert et al. 2010). This may be because our analysis focuses on a specific subset of ethnic/racial violence; Perliger (2012) examined right-wing violence in the US writ large, as opposed to our more narrow focus on acts of terrorism.[[30]](#endnote-30) Alternatively, right-wing groups may choose to limit violence during elections to minimize public opinion fallout to sympathetic politicians (Heger 2015).

We find that the risk of right-wing attacks decline as more women enter the labor force, but is higher during the tenures of Democratic presidents and in counties located in more conservative states. Increasing female labor force participation by one standard deviation (roughly 5.4%) contributes to a 35-36% drop in the risk of right-wing terrorism. County-years during Democratic presidencies see an increased risk of attack between 112 to 118 percent, while the risk of terrorism drops by roughly 29% for counties located in more liberal states.

In addition, we find that counties with less land area are more prone to right-wing terrorism; a one standard deviation increase in land area size results in a roughly 16% drop in the risk of terrorism. This finding warrants further investigation, especially as it differs from previous studies. Since we also control for county urbanization, our models may be picking up an increased risk in small, rural counties. If we were to posit a possible explanation, it may be that these counties have under-resourced police departments, complicating efforts to prevent violence and apprehend those responsible. County population, percent urbanization, and the geographic region controls fail to reach significance.[[31]](#endnote-31)

**DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Our results echo some of Piazza’s (2017) findings using a state-level analysis, particularly the impact of political factors in the timing and location of right-wing terrorist attacks. The US presidency is an important symbolic position, and when it is held by someone the right-wing views as an enemy, the risk of terrorism increases significantly. However, right-wing violence also responds to local politics, particularly electoral competition. Counties in more electorally competitive areas are more likely to experience a right-wing terrorist attack, and federal officials should reconfigure their risk analyses accordingly.

Furthermore, even though right-wing terrorism is more common during periods of Democratic presidencies, the counties that experience this violence tend to be located in more ideologically conservative states, suggesting an interaction between national and local politics. This notably runs counter to Perliger (2012, 97), who argued states “considered liberal—or blue—in terms of their ideological and political orientation” were at higher risk of right-wing terrorism. However, in drawing this connection, Perliger (2012) presents a rank-ordering of states rather than a regression controlling for state population size or other alternative explanations. By controlling for a greater variety of political, economic, and social factors, we believe our model is a more accurate assessment of the link between political ideology and right-wing terrorism.

While political calculations play an essential role in understanding the location of right-wing political violence, we do find that economics matters as well - though not in the direction often assumed. Right-wing attacks tend to be carried out in wealthier counties, not poorer ones. Even though economic hardship may drive right-wing recruitment efforts (Blazak 2001), right-wing terrorists seem to be selecting targets using a different decision calculus. If right-wing violence is about establishing power, more affluent targets could hold greater symbolic power for these groups. Alternatively, Hansen et al. (2020, 12) point out that relative deprivation logic depends on individuals being aware of economic disparities, and wealth disparities may be more obvious to observers in wealthier regions. Under this logic, wealthier regions may trigger greater frustrations, especially by those economically left behind.

Regarding potential social factors, we find some tentative support that the risk of right-wing terrorism decreases as more women enter the workforce. This is in contrast to Piazza (2017) but in line with scholars who link right-wing violence to female *dis*empowerment (Nice 1988; Freilich and Pridemore 2007).[[32]](#endnote-32) This finding warrants further investigation, preferably with better measures of women’s social, political, and economic empowerment. Our results do suggest that rather than trigger a “social anxiety backlash,” expanding women in the labor force may counteract the toxicity that fuels right-wing violence. This would be analogous to the “bare branches” argument used in explanations of comparative political violence (Hudson and den Boer 2004).

Finally, while this article complements much of the existing work on right-wing terrorism, it does suggest one explanation often overlooked: the role of political elite. Most studies focus on “bottom up” explanations for right-wing violence in the US: explanations focusing on grievances, economic or political frustrations, or social backlash all look to understand the triggers that lead certain individuals to carry out these attacks. This bias is unsurprising for two reasons. First, media coverage of US domestic terrorism tends to portray attackers as mentally ill or troubled individuals (Powell 2011), a pattern that has been engrained in the US public perception (D’Orazio and Salehyan 2018). Second, most right-wing terrorists emerge from grassroots and, in the modern era, online networks (Watts 2019). Taken together, this reinforces the perception that right-wing attacks are isolated incidents - difficult to predict systematically, and somehow removed from the broader political dialogue. And, so long as this remains the framework under which right-wing terrorist attacks are analyzed, it will continue to absolve people with power from any responsibility in shaping this dialogue.

Our analyses do not directly test the role of political rhetoric in shaping the risk right-wing attacks, and so we must be careful in ascribing a causal linkage. At the same time, our findings for which localities are the most vulnerable fits with the political conditions that make using exclusionary anti-minority rhetoric a viable electoral strategy. In other countries, electoral competition has been linked to increased anti-minority rhetoric by politicians and the press (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Wilkinson 2004), and this in turn has triggered anti-minority violence. Race and ethnicity is only relevant when “activated” by social context (Chandra and Wilkinson 2008), and political leaders are in an ideal position to prime this identity.

At the same time, not all politicians will respond to electoral competition by playing the race/ethnic card. Some resist due to personal moral convictions, but hoping for ethical politicians is not a viable reform strategy. Luckily, democratic political competition can also provide incentives for belligerent political leaders to moderate their tone over time. Using anti-minority rhetoric may help win an election, but it makes forming alliances with minority politicians or those representing minority constituents extremely difficult, which can jeopardize a politician’s long-term political goals. As research on the contact hypothesis has shown, the attitudes and dialogues of individuals hostile towards out-groups can be shifted through positive interactions with opposing groups and ideas, facilitating cooperation in more “neutral” policy areas, and providing a non-threatening public dialogue to educate about conditions. As Wilkinson (2004) points out, while electoral competition may trigger violence, under the right conditions, it can also reduce it.

**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL**

Supplemental materials are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website. Data and replication materials for this article are available at www.stephennemeth.org/research

**Figure 1:** Right-Wing Terrorist Attacks, 1971-2016

**Table 1:** Right-Wing Terrorism in the US, Mixed Effects Logistic Regression

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Electoral Competition |  | 1.352\*\*\*(.477) | 2.359\*\*(.937) | 1.276\*\*\*(.480) | 2.399\*\*(.935) |
| Non-White Proportion | -.007(.008) | -.005(.008) | .028(.026) | .037(.030) | .079\*(.041) |
| Electoral Competition x Non-White Proportion |  |  | -.0419(.0327) |  | -.047(.033) |
| GRP per capita | .799\*\*\*(.191) | .854\*\*\*(.200) | .853\*\*\*(.198) | .978\*\*\*(.221) | .988\*\*\*(.218) |
| GRP per capita x Non-White Proportion |  |  |  | -.005(.003) | -.005(.003) |
| Presidential Election Year |  | .255 (.162) | .253(.162) | .257(.162) | .255(.162) |
| National FemaleLabor Force Participation | -.090\*\*\*(.022) | -.093\*\*\*(.022) | -.092\*\*\*(.022) | -.091\*\*\*(.022) | -.089\*\*\*(.022) |
| Democratic President | .778\*\*\*(.169) | .772\*\*\*(.172) | .749\*\*\*(.173) | .781\*\*\*(.172) | .757\*\*\*(.173) |
| Liberal State Citizen Ideology | -.025\*\*\*(.008) | -.027\*\*\*(.008) | -.028\*\*\*(.008) | -.026\*\*\*(.008) | -.027\*\*\*(.008) |
| Total Population | .418\*(.237) | .365(.247) | .373(.244) | .316(.251) | .321(.248) |
| % Urban Population | -.048(.050) | -.059(.050) | -.060(.050) | -.064(.050) | -.065(.050) |
| County Land Area | -.219\*\*(.091) | -.229\*\*(.094) | -.232\*\*(.094) | -.242\*\*\*(.094) | -.245\*\*\*(.094) |
| South | -.074(.374) | -.180(.386) | -.160(.385) | -.162(.385) | -.138(.384) |
| West | .521(.344) | .490(.352) | .503(.350) | .510(.350) | .525(.347) |
| Midwest | .101(.311) | -.054(.319) | -.051(.317) | -.007(.320) | .000(.317) |
| Spatial Lag | 1.056(.852) | .917(.895) | .969(.894) | .922(.895) | .976(.895) |
| Constant | -10.23\*\*\*(1.667) | -10.78\*\*\*(1.743) | -11.69\*\*\*(1.882) | -11.30\*\*\*(1.796) | -12.38\*\*\*(1.946) |
| *Random effects parameter* |  |  |  |  |  |
| State Variance | .266(.141) | .268(.138) | .259(.141) | .262(.140) | .252(.143) |
| N (States) | 140,933(49) | 133,539(48) | 133,539(48) | 133,539(48) | 133,539(48) |
| Wald Chisq | 713.9 | 679.5 | 680.1 | 669.9 | 669.9 |
| Log Likelihood | -1028 | -986.4 | -985.6 | -985.5 | -984.5 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All explanatory variables are lagged one year. GRP per capita, female labor force participation, total population, % urban, and land area variables are log transformed. \*p < 0.10; \*\*p < 0.05; \*\*\*p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

**Table 2:** Probability Change for Change Estimates for Table 1, Percentages

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Model 1 | Model 2  | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| **Baseline Probability** | .017 | .017 | .016 | .016 | .015 |
| *Probability Change* |  |  |  |  |  |
| Electoral Competition |  | 22.24 | 32.44 | 20.87 | 31.96 |
| GRP per capita | 258.97 | 295.39 | 294.54 | 344.24 | 347.70 |
| Electoral Competition xNon- White Proportion  |  |  | Not Reported |  | See Figure 2 |
| GRP per capita xNon-White Proportion |  |  |  | Not Reported | See Figure 3 |
| National Female LaborForce Participation | -35.48 | -36.14 | -35.71 | -35.55 | -35.01 |
| Democratic President | 117.69 | 116.34 | 111.36 | 118.28 | 113.18 |
| Liberal State Citizen Ideology | -27.48 | -29.45 | -30.19 | -28.07 | -28.87 |
| County Land Area | -15.86 | -15.75 | -15.87 | -16.51 | -16.76 |

Note: Probability changes reported for significant variables only (p < 0.05). Percentages based on marginal effects, calculated either as moving from 0 to 1 for dichotomous variables or a standard deviation increase from the mean for continuous variables. Positive numbers represent an increase in attack risk per county; negative numbers a reduction.

**Figure 2:** Marginal Effect of Electoral Competition Conditioned on County Non-White Proportion

Note: Predicted probabilities for Model 5, with the dotted lines representing the 95% confidence interval. Other variables set to their mean or mode.

**Figure 3:** Marginal Effect of GRP per capita Conditioned on County Non-White Proportion

****Note: Predicted probabilities for Model 5, with the dotted lines representing the 95% confidence interval. Other variables set to their mean or mode.

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1. Right-wing is sometimes used interchangeably with far-right. By terrorism, we use the definition from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD): “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation” (GTD 2017, 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (START 2017) finds an even wider and more enduring gulf: since 1970, right-wing perpetrators have committed 255 acts of terror against 64 committed by Islam-affiliated perpetrators - a ratio of nearly 4:1 (Miller 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The contrast in lethality is even more stark when considering other sources of data. The Center for Investigative Reporting points out that only 13% of Islamist attacks led to fatalities; in contrast, almost a third of right-wing incidents led to fatalities (Neiwert 2017). Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League (2017) finds that 74% of the 372 murders caused by domestic extremists between 2007 and 2016 were attributable to the right-wing. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Piazza (2017, 53) provides an excellent overview of the empirical limitations of this literature, highlighting that most research in this field is comprised of “historical case-studies of specific movements, profiles of individual terrorists or theoretical works...”, and that the few data-driven studies often suffer from “significant design flaws.” We believe our county-level analysis of attack location addresses many of these criticisms. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Scholars who do emphasize a link between diversity - particularly ethnic diversity - and terrorism generally assert that perceived ethnic tensions are less important at predicting terrorism than economic variables (Basuchoudhary and Shugart 2010), or argue that ethnicity only becomes relevant when coupled with political exclusion or other intervening factors (Choi and Piazza 2016; Hansen et al. 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Piazza (2017) finds that right-wing terrorism is more prevalent in U.S. states with higher abortion rates and greater female labor force participation. However, anti-abortion violence, a subset of right-wing terrorism, tends to occur in states with larger gender pay gaps and with higher rates of homicide and rape against women (Nice 1988; Freilich and Pridemore 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Some research links individual economic hardship to right-wing violence (Beck and Tolnay 1990). Right-wing terrorists have lower levels of education and fewer job skills (Smith 1994), and many were unemployed when they carried out their attacks (Gruenewald et al. 2013). However, regional economics have no discernible impact on either hate crimes or terrorism (Green et al. 1998; Piazza 2017), making economics a poor predictor of attack locations. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Sprinzak’s (1995) theory of “split delegitimization” contends that right-wing extremists have a primary conflict with an “inferior” community and a secondary conflict with the government. It is this secondary conflict that motivates violence and lawlessness. This delegitimation can go both ways: the US mainstream, by rejecting far right rhetoric, reinforces the social isolation of extremist individuals (Kaplan 1995). As a result, violence becomes a means for an ignored group to achieve voice. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Past research finds no link between right-wing violence and federal or state tax rates (O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Piazza 2017). Furthermore, right-wing attacks increased during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Perliger 2012, 87), a period of declining federal tax rates (Tax Policy Center 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Laryš and Mareš (2011), for instance, contend that some forms of right-wing violence in Russia is motivated by local ethnic conflicts. In the US, numerous studies find that right-wing activity is highest in states and counties facing significant demographic or social changes (McVeigh and Sikkink 2001; Tolnay and Beck 1995; Van Dyke et al. 2001; Adamczyk et al. 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For example, see Horowitz (2001), Laakso (2007), and Aksoy (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Wilkinson’s (2004) focus is explaining the outbreak of Hindu-Muslim riots in India, but his theory draws on multiple examples of anti-minority violence, including white supremacist violence in the US. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Bartels (2020) finds that ethnocentric Republicans are significantly more acceptant of violence and lawlessness than other Republicans. While his analysis does not focus on the far right, it is a reasonable extension to assume that the strong ethnocentrism typical of right-wing supporters would make them even more acceptant of political violence than traditional conservatives. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Non-white demographic growth has been linked to the mobilization of white supremacist groups (McVeigh et al. 2004; Durso and Jacobs 2013) and some forms of right-wing violence (Soule and Van Dyke 1999; Beck 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. While our dataset begins in 1970, our use of lagged independent variables results in our analyses beginning in 1971. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Beyond fulfilling the criteria listed above, terrorist incidents are only included in the GTD if they are intentional, “entail some level of violence or immediate threat of violence,” and are perpetrated by subnational actors (START 2018, 10). As this is a strict definition of terrorism, our analyses contain fewer incidents than comparable studies. As a hard test of our model, we relax the assumptions in our coding and analyze a more inclusive dataset of right-wing violence (see Appendix B). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Please see Appendix Table A1 for a full list of perpetrators and the number of events attributed to them. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Appendix A for a more thorough description of our dependent variable coding. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Of this 0.02%, all but 2 county-years had less than 10 attacks. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For most counties, determining the district is straightforward as their entire land area is encompassed within the district. In those counties split between two or more districts, we allocate the county to the district which makes up the largest land area within that county. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For a full discussion of our data sources, see Appendix A. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. In Appendix B, we run an alternative model using the change in non-white population. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. In Appendix B, we run alternative models using state-wide poverty and unemployment rates. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Due to inconsistencies in data collection at the state-and county-level within the U.S., female labor force participation is only available at the national-level for our timeframe. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. We also run alternative models using state government ideology based on partisan control of state politics (see Appendix B). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. A full discussion of how this variable was calculated can be found in Appendix A. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. To interpolate, we use STATA’s *ipolate* command. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. In comparison, fixed effects models only account for within-group variance, while random effects models only account for between-group effects. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Non-white proportion only reaches significance in Model 5, and this significance is outside standard levels. Furthermore, as Braumoeller (2004) discusses, a significant finding for a constituent term in an interaction model can only be interpreted when the other constituent term is set to 0. This would imply counties with no GRP per capita and no electoral competition, which is unrealistic. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Perliger’s (2012, 85) definition of right-wing violence includes hate crimes, which yields a total of 4,420 incidents between 1990 and 2012. Given that hate crimes and terrorism may operate under different processes (Deloughery et al. 2012), this may explain our differing findings regarding causal triggers. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. We find some evidence of a link between county population size and right-wing terrorism in Model 1, but it is outside standard significance test levels (p <.10). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Given the similarity between our analysis and Piazza’s, this could be due to differences in aggregation or because we use a more restrictive definition of right-wing terrorism. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)