

# Explaining the Spontaneous Nature of Far-Right Violence in the United States

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## Abstract

Racialist, Anti-Federalist, and Christian Fundamentalist ideologies drive adherents of the American Far Right. Terrorists like Timothy McVeigh and Dylan Roof exemplify the damage, to property and life, caused by planned, calculated acts of terrorism motivated by far-right sentiments. Nevertheless, a growing number of American Far Right ideologically motivated attacks occur spontaneously and without premeditation. The stabbing to death of Richard Collins III by Sean Christopher Urbanski at the University of Maryland is a case in point, as it occurred without warning and no evidence suggests the victim or offender knew each other. This murder and similar incidents drive us to question what drives affiliates of American Far Right groups to commit spontaneous, unplanned attacks? More specifically, we develop a theoretical framework that strives to explain how personality traits and the characteristics of the offender's community, may facilitate such incidents. To test our theoretical framework, we utilize a dataset of 1,000 spontaneous far-right attacks between 1990-2012 as well as a dataset of a control group of approximately 300 planned attacks driven by adherents of the American Far Right. We find that locations undergoing demographic diversification, related to 'other' racial categories, and which have an increasing median individual income, will have a higher chance of spontaneous attacks. Coincidentally, spontaneous perpetrators are less socially connected to their community than planned perpetrators. We argue spontaneous perpetrators react spontaneously because they observe their community changing and react criminally without an element of planning.

**Keywords:** American far right, hate crime, spontaneous terrorism, violence, national security

## Introduction

Richard Collins and Sean Urbanski never met before May 20, 2017. Around 3:00 AM that day, Collins was waiting with two other friends for an Uber driver at a bus stop located on the campus of the University of Maryland. He had good reasons to celebrate with his friends. He had just been commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army and was supposed to graduate from Bowie State University a few days later. When Urbanski, a student at the University of Maryland, arrived at the vicinity of the bus stop and noticed Collins, he approached Collins while shouting "step left, step left if you know what's best for you." [1] After Collins simply replied "No," Urbanski responded by stabbing Collins to death and then fleeing from the scene. The subsequent police investigation revealed that the targeting of Collins was probably not arbitrary. Sean Urbanski was an active member of a Facebook group titled "Alt-Reich: Nation," hence the fact that Collins was an African American seems to be one of the motivating factors for Urbanski's unprovoked violent behavior. [2] A few days later, on May 26, Jeremy Joseph Christian noticed two young African American women, one of whom was Muslim and wore a headscarf, onboard a train in Portland, Oregon. Christian began to target offensive and racist language at the two young women. Three men intervened, telling Christian to stop. At that point, Christian stabbed the men, killing two of them. [3] Law enforcement later exposed that Joseph participated in at least one march of white supremacy activists, but he was not a member of a specific group.

The fatal events on the University of Maryland's campus and onboard a train in Portland were seen at the time as a part of a broader trend of the increase in far-right violence in the United States following the 2016 election of President Donald J. Trump. For example, the Anti-Defamation League reported an 86 percent rise in Anti-Semitic incidents in the first three months of 2017, and the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University at San Bernardino found that the number of hate crimes in major American cities increased by close to 20 percent during 2017. [4] Other aspects of these attacks received less attention. These

include the spontaneous behavior of the perpetrator and the fact that the attack was unplanned. Moreover, while Sean Urbanski was active in a racist Facebook group, there was no evidence that he participated in any actual activities related to far-right ideology before his attack on Collins. The characteristics of these attack are not so uncommon, at least when examining the data on far-right violence in the United States. Unlike some other ideological camps that engage in violent tactics, many attacks inspired by far-right ideology seem to be perpetrated without advanced planning and by perpetrators who are not associated with an active group or have a criminal or violent background.<sup>[5]</sup>

This is puzzling, as most of the literature that explores political violence and related processes of radicalization tend to introduce the engagement in political violence as the end-result of a fairly gradual process which consists of ideological radicalization, joining a militant group's activities, and only then progress to actual participation in pre-planned violent operations.<sup>[6]</sup> While there is some scholarship that addresses the spontaneity of some hate crime perpetrators, the work in this area focuses on rehabilitating the perpetrator rather than the characteristics of a spontaneous hate crime.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that there is limited empirical exploration regarding the spontaneity of some of the far-right violence.

The current study aims to fill this gap by utilizing a unique dataset of perpetrators of attacks inspired by far-right ideology, as well as of the socio-demographic characteristics of the perpetrator's environment, to identify if specific personal socio-demographic traits, or socio-political environmental factors, facilitate the likelihood of spontaneous, unplanned attacks by individuals who have no previous connection with their victim or intention to commit violence in that situation. We define spontaneous incidents to include cases where there is no direct connection between the victim and perpetrator, the act occurred without premeditation or provocation, and the perpetrator did not acquire material solely to engage in the attack. We believe spontaneity should not prevent these incidents from being designated as acts of terrorism, even though they occur without premeditation, a common element in many definitions of terrorism. We argue that these cases exemplify the inherent goal of a terrorist, to promote political objectives by utilizing violence in order to generate fear and anxiety within a specific collective, regardless of the existence or absence of premeditation.

The next section will provide a brief overview of the current landscape of the American Far Right, as well as discuss operational characteristics of the violence produced by violent domestic sub-state groups in Western societies. Subsequently, we develop an analytical framework and relevant hypotheses. The last two sections elaborate on our data gathering procedures and methodological tools, as well as the theoretical and policy relevance of our findings.

### ***Overview: The American Violent Far-Right***

The American Far Right is highly diverse and fragmented. It is characterized by significant ideological diversity, organizational instability (frequent merges and splits), as well as in the exercise of various operational methods (distinct groups prefer to use different tactics against different types of targets).<sup>[8]</sup> Nonetheless, in the last few years, scholars were able to provide a fairly efficient conceptualization of the ideological boundaries of the American Far Right, as well as deciphering some of the dynamics that influence its level of popularity and operational characteristics.<sup>[9]</sup>

Most scholars agree that all American Far Right groups and movements manifest two ideological characteristics. <sup>[10]</sup> The first is “internal homogenization,” which expresses the desire that all people who reside in the homeland will share similar primordial characteristics. In the American context, it is reflected specifically in the aspiration that all residents or citizens of the polity/community will share the same ethnic, religious, and national characteristics. Moreover, many American Far Right groups emphasize that contemporary social, economic, and political crises result from the inability of modern societies to implement this principle. For example, the Californian “Loyal White Knights,” were involved recently in a violent protest that linked “soft” immigration policies with terrorism and street crime.<sup>[11]</sup> The second ideological component that all American Far Right groups share is “nativism,” or the opposition to foreign influence. This includes the rejection of non-

native cultural, religious, and normative practices. In the American context, it is manifested by the presentation of holidays/costumes, social behaviors, art, linguistic phrases, musical themes, and other cultural expressions of immigrants as a threat to American identity and national cohesiveness.[12] In addition to these two consensual ideological components, some American Far Right groups also embrace xenophobic and racist sentiments, support exclusionist policies (the segregation between ethnic groups in various spheres of society such as the labor market or educational system) and promote nostalgic adoration of history and traditional values combined with aspiration for “strong” state and anti-democratic practices.[13]

Despite the ideological similarities, American Far Right groups differ in the mechanisms they use to justify their ideological views, and in the practices that they employ to promote them. These differences allowed scholars to develop a typology of the contemporary American Far Right, which includes three major categories.[14] The first includes various white supremacy groups and movements such as KKK associations, Neo-Nazi groups, and Skinheads organizations that advocate what they perceive as the appropriate and natural racial hierarchy. While the Skinheads are referred by some sociologists as a distinct sub-/counter-culture, in the context of this text we are focusing on the Racist Skinheads organizations which originated from this sub-culture.[15] The groups in this category promote practices and policies that supposed to ensure the privileged status of white people and their social control over (what they perceive as) lesser races, as well as oppose any policies that aim to increase racial or ethnic integration, provide other ethnic/racial groups more access to material and political capital, and generally promote greater cultural and demographic diversity. In recent years, white supremacist groups sought to connect these sentiments to contemporary political discourse; thus, these groups tend to be vocal in their opposition to multi-culturalism, illegal immigration, interracial marriage, black on white crime, Jewish (and other ethnic) influences in society and affirmative action.[16]

The second category includes anti-governmental groups such as Militias, Sovereign Citizens, and Anti-Taxation advocates.[17] Many of these groups promote conspiracy theories that are based on the general narrative that the US government, including its fundamental institutions, were already, or in the process of being, hijacked by external/foreign powers that are looking to promote a “New World Order,” (NWO) in which the United State will be merged into a global government.[18] In order to facilitate this NWO, they believe the government is interested in undermining the power of those who oppose it, by eroding constitutional rights related to civil liberties, and gun- and land-ownership. In the last two decades, scholars and journalists have written about the emergence of groups that completely reject the legitimacy of federal authorities and legislation (e.g. Sovereign Citizens), as well as groups such as the Oath Keepers and 3 Percenters (III percent) that try to espouse more mainstream image by promoting their ideas without relying on conspiracy theories, nonetheless display militant practices.[19]

Most scholars of political violence define violent religious organizations as collectives which utilize sacred texts for three major goals: to provide moral justification for their violent practices, to enhance the cohesiveness of the group, and to mobilize support.[20] The groups that are included in the last category, of fundamentalist groups, such Christian Identity Churches, and anti-abortion associations, indeed utilize spurious religious heritage, symbols, rituals, and norms to popularize their beliefs and ideology, to ensure the loyalty of their followers, and to expand their influence.[21] They also use such a mechanism to produce a moral justification for activism against groups/communities/individuals whom they perceive as a threat. More specifically, Christian Identity groups’ interpretation of the holy texts argue that in contrast to the accepted convention, Aryans are the true chosen people, descendants of the Hebrew people, not those who identify as Jews.[22] Thus, Aryans enjoy superior qualities and attributes and should lead the nations of mankind. Moreover, the Identity narratives assert that a racial war between the white Anglo-Saxon nations and various non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups such as the “Children of Satan” (Jews) and “mud-people” (non-whites) is imminent and will reflect the ongoing struggle between forces of light and forces of evil, as described in various religious texts.[23] Hence, it is not surprising that Christian Identity groups are one of the most effective promoters of Anti-Semitic and racist propaganda. Similarly, a look at the Army of God’s Manual (Army of God is considered the most violent anti-abortion group in recent American history), which for many militant Anti-abortionist serves as an operational bible, will uncover that the entire rationalization and operational framework of the group was based on specific

interpretation of holy texts, mainly biblical verses.[24]

The ideological differences between the diverse types of groups are also reflected in the organizational structure and operationalization of the violence that these groups produce. For example, since the Militias and Christian Identity groups tend to adopt a fairly hierarchical structure, with significant internal disciplines and clear rules and practices of behaviors, it is very rare to see violent operations by members of these groups that are not pre-planned and include multiple perpetrators.[25] Similarly, the different ideological focus can explain the tendency of anti-government groups to aim their violence mainly towards representative or proxies of state and federal governments, while the traditional white supremacy groups aim most of their attacks against minorities and foreigners.[26] The less hierarchical and informal nature of many of the current white supremacy groups also explain why many of their members tend to engage in less sophisticated attacks, and also are overrepresented among those perpetrating spontaneous attacks. Lastly, the fundamentalist groups' violence is usually characterized by highly sophisticated operations that are perpetrated by factions of the organizations, or by members who act as lone wolves.[27]

### ***Operational Practices***

The growing focus of Jihadi groups on “inspiring” home-grown radicalized individuals to engage in mass casualty attacks, raised significant concerns among policymakers and academics. The latter devoted significant resources and efforts to decipher the processes that lead an individual to adopt radical views and engage in politically motivated violence. A review of models of radicalization that were developed by scholars in the last twenty years reveals that most have a similar structure, involving three general phases.[28]

(1) The first phase includes an increase in political awareness and political knowledge and efficacy (termed by Wiktorowicz “Cognitive Opening”). In this phase, the individual develops political and social perceptions related to his sense of political or social deprivation and the realization that the status quo is no longer satisfactory.[29] This situation triggers a search for viable answers to perceived injustices/deprivations. These answers, in many cases, are provided by close social networks or via personal exploration; (2) the second stage includes the growing affinity of the individual to a specific religious or ideological framework, that seems to provide answers/explanations for his perceived injustice or deprivation and provides a way to channel growing frustrations into political activism. This is manifested by growing interest in the activities of a specific group, increasing interest in the group’s ideology, and the seeking of opportunities to become more politically active; (3) the third stage involves actually joining a militant group, further internalizing its ideology, and an increased willingness to engage in extreme activities, including violence.[30]

Some models are more detailed regarding their description of the indoctrination process, while others tend to make distinctions among stages that lead to involvement in actual violence. Moreover, the growing fragmentation of many of today’s radical movements in some cases also led to the remission of the organizational recruitment stage (mainly relevant to cases of so-called inspired or lone wolves attacks).[31] Nonetheless, most follow the general path described above. What these models also share is a premise which is based on two fundamental assumptions. The first is that radicalization is a gradual process, and its various stages are manifested in behavioral changes; the second is that radicalization is associated with a social framework that involves joining a terrorist group or ideological movement/party that promotes violent practices.[32] However, as we indicated above, in some cases the radicalization process seems to take a quicker form which is less visible or rarely manifested in changes in the behavioral characteristics of the individual. It is also difficult in many such cases to identify an affiliation of the perpetrator to an ideological group. Hence, there is a need to explore the dynamics that lead to “spontaneous” attacks. In the next section, we elaborate on our analytical approach.

## ***Analytical Framework***

Spontaneous attacks that are politically motivated seem to contradict most accepted perceptions related to violent crimes and homicides. More specifically, the criminological literature indicates that most homicides are relatively spontaneous and a result of intense emotional state, the literature further indicates that in many cases they were precipitated by the victims, involve people who knew each other before and are mostly intra-racial. [33] Nevertheless, spontaneous far-right attacks seem to be rarely triggered by the victims' behavior; in most cases, these attacks do not include prior familiarity between the perpetrator and the victim and are also, for the most part, inter-racial.[34] These fundamental differences seem to establish that spontaneous attacks which are ideologically motivated, represent somewhat of a separate phenomenon than spontaneous crimes.

We structured our analytical frame around the literature of security studies and criminology. Previous work on terrorist perpetrators indicates that while many people will choose to join an organization, each person represents a unique identity, requiring the disaggregation of perpetrators at the individual level.[35] Furthermore, scholars have theorized about the impact of environmental conditions on criminality, especially on hate crime, where spatial and geographic conditions drive the characteristics of such crimes. However, the field has experienced a lack of quantitative analyses.[36] As a result, we wanted to find a way to combine both the environmental and perpetrator data to analyze spontaneity, relying partially on elements from social disorganization theory and situational action theory.[37]

We developed an analytical framework that tries to capture two primary sets of factors which may lead an individual to spontaneously engage in politically motivated violence. The first are various elements which relate to the socio-demographic background of the individual, as well as some aspects of his or her personality traits. Theories that imply an association between these two elements and the tendency of individuals to participate in acts of political violence or to join groups that exercise such violence are highly prominent in the literature. Numerous studies evaluated how socio-economic indicators such as social mobilization, educational background, occupational and immigration status may facilitate engagement in radical political activism, including terrorism and insurgency.[38] Some of these studies emphasize that access to political information and the human capital to understand and internalize this information is dependent on resources which are available to upper-class economic echelons such as free time, financial freedom, and robust social networks.[39] Thus, we should anticipate individuals with high levels of material and social capital (i.e. educated, employed, and non-immigrants) would be more inclined, on average, to join terrorist groups, than their less well educated, unemployed, or foreign-born peers. Other scholars argue that individuals from high socio-economic echelons (the educated, employed, and non-immigrants) have more to lose by engaging in costly political activism, whereas individuals with a lower socioeconomic status risk less when they engage in political activism and stand to gain the most from a change in the status quo.[40]

In the context of spontaneous political violence, we will test if socio-economic characteristics can discourage or incentivize specific attitudes that may lead to violence when a perpetrator meets someone deemed an existential enemy in a specific setting. More specifically, we can test how the socio-economic background of the perpetrator may facilitate (or discourage) violent manifestations of radical views. We chose to include a variety of variables including personal characteristics (marital status, age, gender, parental status, etc.), socio-economic status (education, employment, military history, criminal history, etc.), online/social media presence and its use as a source of ideological exploration, and factors regarding the perpetrator's criminal record, conviction, and imprisonment. Scholars have used these factors to a significant extent in criminological research and research on terrorist perpetrators.[41]

The second component of our analytical framework is focusing on the environment of the individual. Since the early 2000s, a growing number of scholars emphasized the role of the political, social, and economic characteristics of the individuals' close environment on his likelihood to join militant groups. Their studies assert that the individual's familiarity and emotional attachment to a specific normative and value-based framework is the main factor which facilitates his radicalization and willingness to engage in extreme acts of political activism. [42] Other scholars preferred to put more emphasis on the process in which the radicalization is catalyzed by

the individual's primary social networks, as well as the norms and practices that are being manifested by the community to which he belongs.[43] Considering the empirical support that this theoretical approach was able to obtain, and the fact that scholars of social violence traditionally emphasize that structural aspects of the environment can potentially facilitate violent crimes, it is important to test if there are environmental factors that can facilitate the tendency to engage in ideologically motivated unplanned attacks.

### **Methodology**

#### *Compilation of Research Population and Control Group*

We used the Combating Terrorism Center's 2012 dataset on violent incidents and property crimes associated with adherents of American Far Right ideologies. The dataset includes over 4,400 incidents that occurred from 1990 to 2012 and in which the perpetrator(s) is/are a member(s) of American Far Right group(s) and/or were motivated by far-right ideology.[44] Multiple sources were used in order to compile the dataset, including the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Dataset, the Southern Poverty Law Center's hate crime dataset, and reports from non-governmental organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism.[45] We compiled both our research sample and a control group from the dataset including violent and property offenses. We chose to include both types of incidents (property and violent) because, in this context, we argue vandalism is targeting a person or group of people for a religious, social, or political reason, which qualifies it as being considered a politically motivated crime. Further, some crimes are difficult to differentiate as violent or property, such as cross burnings, directed threats with hate symbols, and arsons.[46] The first set of cases includes incidents that occurred spontaneously and without previous direct provocation, while the second set includes cases in which there is evidence that the perpetrator planned the attack. Subsequently, we expanded the dataset by adding additional variables to gain a better comprehension of the perpetrator's characteristics and his environment. The authors coded the data with the help of a team of research assistants who identified the cases and coded relevant data. Additionally, the coding was cross-checked to ensure the validity and accuracy of both the primary sample and the control group.

The dataset of spontaneous attacks was compiled in two stages. First, we identified violent incidents based on three characteristics. First, the victim and the perpetrator had no prior contact or history, which would indicate that the victim and perpetrator knew one another. Second, the incident occurred without planning or known premeditation. The line between premeditation and spontaneity is difficult to discern given the limitation of using publicly available data. We chose to use a premeditation and deliberation standard. For example, first-degree homicide, or premeditated homicide is a killing of another person with malice and aforethought, in which the perpetrator planned and deliberated the attack before contact with the victim. Comparatively, second-degree homicide includes malice and aforethought, but there is no deliberation or premeditation before the interaction between the victim and the perpetrator.[47] For spontaneity, the interaction between victim and perpetrator occurred during the perpetrator's and victim's routine activities where neither the perpetrator nor the victim intended to have contact with the other before their encounter. Third, the perpetrator relied on an immediate context to act (for example, the victim's skin color, ethnic affiliation, language, or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity). This immediate context indicates a desire for immediate satisfaction and impulsive behavior, which does not include premeditation and deliberation because the behavior occurs without prior deliberation regarding the victim.[48] These criteria were validated in prior research on hate crimes that identifies the spontaneity of hate-motivated crime, in which a perpetrator experiences a 'trigger' that results in an unplanned hate crime against a victim.[49] Furthermore, Koehler discovered a similar phenomenon in Germany where citizens without links to extremism engaged in hate and extremist-motivated crime in 2015 and 2016.[50]

There are some potential limitations to correctly identifying spontaneity. First, the lack of publicly available information on some incidents may obscure the perpetrator's deliberation or premeditation. Additionally, one could argue that the engagement with ideological propaganda amounts to premeditation or at least prior

consideration for the engagement in violence. However, in the United States, terrorist propaganda is not illegal to possess, and the consumption of propaganda does not satisfy definitions of conspiracy or premeditation unless the perpetrator planned and deliberated a specific attack outside of the propaganda. As a result, we define spontaneity, regardless of the perpetrator's exposure to propaganda, by the context of the perpetrator's actions and statements, not by prior involvement in propaganda or extremist activity.

In the second stage, we excluded cases that met at least one of two exclusion criteria. The first criterion was cases in which the perpetrator acquired material to engage in the attack, whereby the material was independent of other uses. For example, if a perpetrator constructed a cross, transported it, erected it, and set it on fire, the incident required planning, and thus we excluded this incident from the dataset because the perpetrator acquired material to build a cross that had no other intended use. The second criterion for exclusion was if the perpetrator intended to commit an act of property crime or violence regardless of the victim. For example, if a perpetrator drove around seeking any 'minority' or 'minority-owned' property with the intent of attacking a person or property, we excluded this case because the offender planned the act, regardless of the victim or circumstance. For example, in hate crime literature 'gay bashing' or other types of thrill-seeking hate crimes, are an act in which individuals drive around seeking a racial minority member or members of the LGBTQ community to assault.<sup>[51]</sup> For our work, such an act amounts to a level of premeditation.

Subsequently, we retained the cases that met the inclusion criteria and did not meet the exclusion criteria as the dataset of spontaneous violent attacks. These criteria identified 1,193 spontaneous cases of violence. One example that exemplifies a spontaneous attack occurred in Central Park in New York City. A man observed two men sitting together on a blanket in the middle of the park. The men appeared as if they were involved with each other in a romantic relationship. The perpetrator approached the men and began yelling homophobic epithets before spitting on the men. Unfortunately for the perpetrator, the men were undercover New York City Police Officers monitoring the park for illegal activity. In this instance, the victims were unknown to the perpetrator before their interaction in the routine activity of being in Central Park at the same time. The perpetrator perceived their sexual orientation and acted without prior premeditation and deliberation to attack the men for his perception of their sexual orientation. While the perpetrator did intend to harass and assault the men, this level of deliberation only occurred upon 'trigger' in which the perpetrator witnessed the two men sitting together.

A similar process guided the compilation of the control group's dataset. We aimed to include cases that involved clear advanced planning, such as Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing, the bombings by Eric Rudolph, Scott Roeder's shooting of George Tiller, and incidents like Dylan Roof's killing of nine African-Americans during a Bible study in the basement of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. With these cases in mind, we utilized two inclusion criteria: (a) the perpetrator took specific steps in preparation for the incident and (b) the intent of the act emerged before contact with the victim. If an attacker sought a person, ethnic group, or location with the intent of committing a crime, then the perpetrator engaged in some element of premeditation. In the control group, we identified cases where the perpetrator(s) engaged in premeditation and deliberation. For example, these incidents routinely included two types of cases. The first are incidents where law enforcement interrupted an attack in the planning stages, such as planned bombings by militia groups in the United States. The second include cases of planned, calculated violence such as the Oklahoma City bombing, where Timothy McVeigh built a bomb, rented a Ryder truck, and carefully placed the vehicle in a location so he could escape before the blast.

### *Independent Variables*

We collected the data for the independent variables in two phases. In the first phase, we collected data about the characteristics of the locations of the incidents (i.e., environmental variables). Previous research indicates that environmental conditions in a location, particularly economic, political, and demographic factors influence a person's political ideology.<sup>[52]</sup> In particular, we included racial demographics and religious demographics since racial minorities and religious minorities are frequent targets of far-right violence in the United States. Additionally, we included economic variables because the literature on racist organizations shows that these

groups relied on economic insecurity to drive recruitment.[53]

In the data collection of the environmental data, we used the lowest level of analysis available for the location of the incident. We collected the data at the city/town level or when the incident occurred; in unincorporated areas we used data from the county level. We based our selection on the location identification from the initial dataset. The source of this variable data was primarily the United States Census Bureau. We collected the data for the year the incident occurred. If a location did not have data for the year the incident occurred, we drew the data from the closest decennial census. Therefore, for any incident year from 1991 to 1995, 2001 to 2005, and 2011 to 2012, that did not have data available, we drew data from 1990, 2000, and 2010, respectively. [54] Additional data was extracted from several other sources, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report[55] and the Association of Religion Data Archives' U.S. Congregational Membership reports.[56]

Furthermore some variables were only available at the county or state level. Due to variations in local politics and religious structures, we chose to measure these variables at the state and county level, respectively, because this is level at which the data is available for all locations and consistent between locations. Collecting political or religious data at the local level would prove problematic in a nationwide sample due to variations in collection practices and structures across the United States. Political structures vary widely at the local level, but every state, except for Nebraska, has a House of Representatives, a State Senate, and a State Governor. With such information, we could capture party affiliation, Republican, Democrat, or other, for data on the composition of these political offices. We admit the differing levels of analysis is a limitation, but we maintain consistency across every location, and every variable has the same measurement level, regardless of the case.

Overall, we coded 24 environmental variables (see Table 1). We separated the variables into demographics, local socio-economic factors, and city or town crime rates. The location's demographics include information about the population size and density, gendered distribution, family size, median age, and racial, ethnic, and religious composition.[57] The socio-economic variables include percentages of individual and family poverty, individual's median income, unemployment rate, and proportion of the location's population which completed high school and obtained a bachelor's degree. Crime rates include a measure of property crime and violent crime per 100,000 residents, calculated from the raw crime rates and the population figures reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In the second phase, we coded socio-demographic information about the perpetrators via open source information from media reports and court case files.[58] In some cases, the perpetrators were juveniles, and thus authorities released limited information about their identities and background. This information included only the juvenile's gender and age. In these circumstances, we coded each unknown juvenile perpetrator as an unknown juvenile and coded the remaining variables based on the publicly available information. We excluded cases where the number of perpetrators was never publicly named or known. Overall, we coded 50 variables related to the perpetrators. These include age, marital status, place of residence, location of birth, parental status, educational background, occupational background, military experience, mental illness' background, background of substance abuse, perpetrator's membership in hate or extremist groups and data related to the perpetrator's involvement in court cases (including convictions, trial information, and correctional sentences). We guided our variable selection based on the work of Perliger, Koehler-Derrick, and Pedahzur who identified demographic variables responsible for explaining the gap between organizational participation and the participation in terrorist violence.[59] Table 2 offers an overview of the variables used in this study.

**Table 1:** Socio-Demographic Variables of Incident Locations

Variable	Variable Description	Data Source
Political Affiliation	Represents the control of each state legislature and Governor's office by Democrat, Republican, or Other.	United States Census Bureau, the National Conference of State Legislatures, National Governors Association
Population	The total population of the city/town/county	United States Census Bureau
Population Density	The density of the city/town/county's population	United States Census Bureau
Racial Demographics	The percentage of the city that is White, Black, Hispanic, and Other.	United States Census Bureau
Poverty Statistics	The percent of the population living in individual and family poverty	United States Census Bureau
Religious Composition	The composition of the county for Catholics, Protestants, Jewish, and Other.	The Association for Religious Data Archives
Median Age	The median age of the city/town/county	United States Census Bureau
Crime Rates	The violent and property crime rates per 100,000 residents	The Federal Bureau of Investigation
Unemployment	The percent of the population that is characterized as unemployed	United States Census Bureau
Family Size	The average family size in the city/town/county	United States Census Bureau
Education Characteristics	The percent of the population that achieved a high school diploma or higher and the percent of the population that achieved a bachelor's degree or higher	United States Census Bureau
Gender Demographic	The percent of males and females in the city/town/county	United States Census Bureau
Median Income	The median individual income in the city/town/county	United States Census Bureau

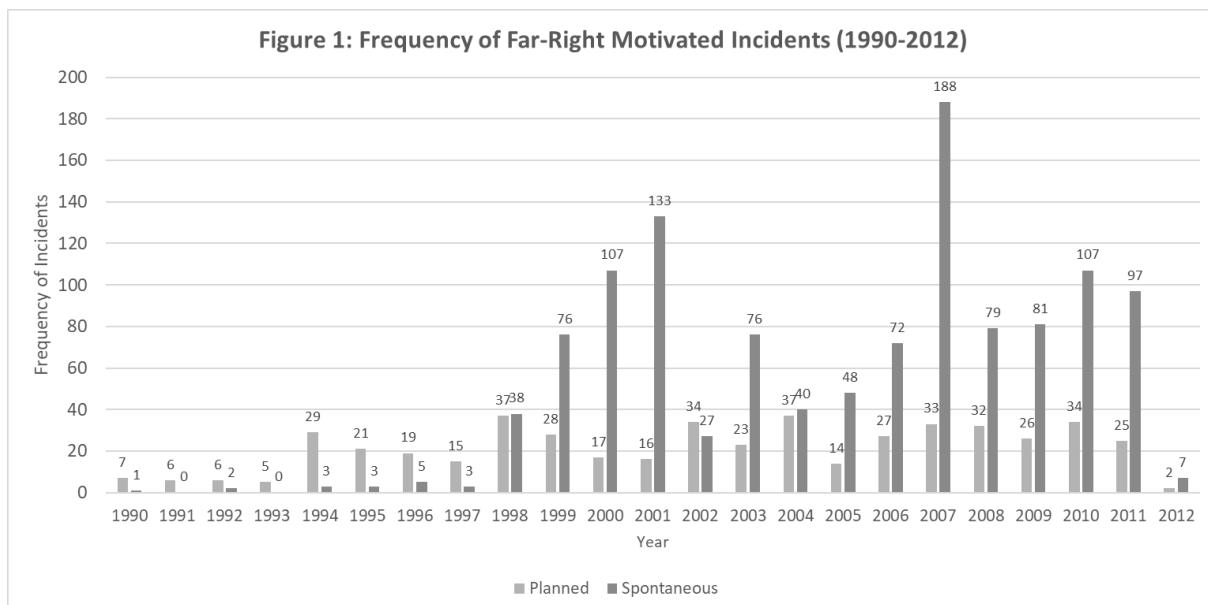
**Table 2:** Terrorist Offender Variable Descriptions

Variable	Description	Operationalization
Personal Demographics	Name	
	Age	
Family Demographics	Marital Status	Single/Unmarried/Divorced
		Partnered
		Married
	Biological Children	Yes No
Education Demographics	Highest Completed Educational Level	Did Not Complete High School
		High School Diploma/ Equivalent
		Higher Education Degree/ Certificate
Prior Legal Problems	Prior Incarceration	Yes
		No
Hate/Terrorist Group Status	Membership Status	Yes
		No
	Name of Hate/Terrorist Group	
Formal Criminal Case	Plea Agreement	Yes
		No
	Length of Sentence	

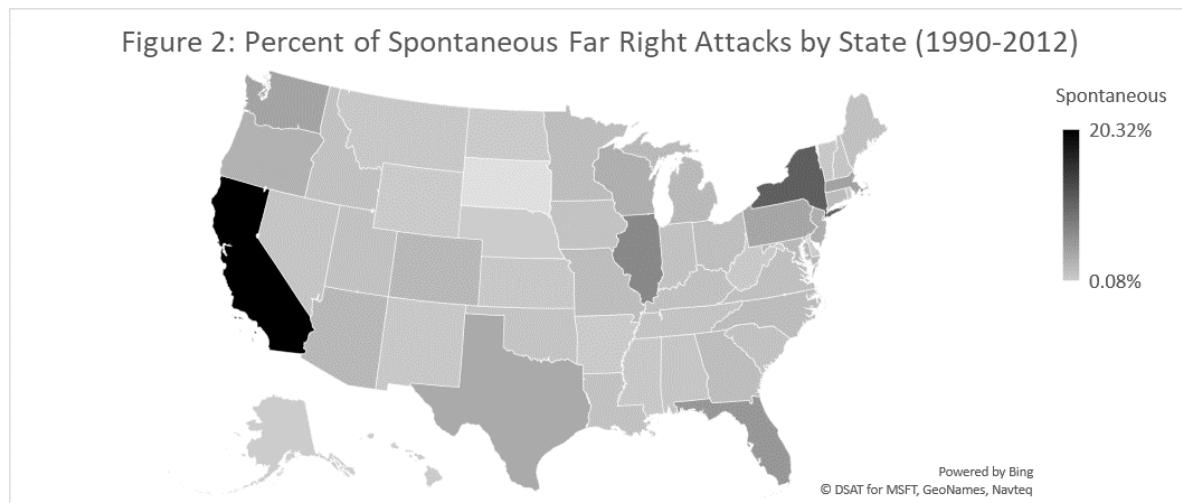
### Results

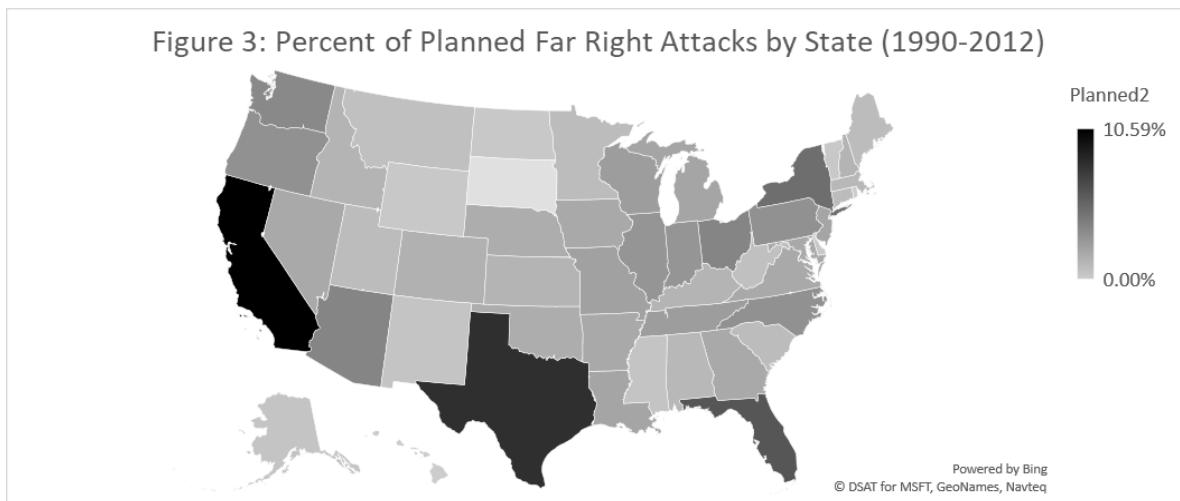
#### Summary Statistics

Our dataset includes 1,686 incidents,[60] which are divided between the research sample (1,193 cases that occurred spontaneously), and control groups (493 cases that the perpetrators planned). In the coding process, we coded the environmental and location data for 1,189 cases - 800 spontaneous attacks and 389 planned incidents. Following the coding of the environmental data, we coded perpetrator information for a total of 1,177 cases - 803 spontaneous incidents and 374 planned attacks. In this section, we will provide a broad overview of our data. Figure 1 depicts the year-to-year count of our data over the twenty-two-year period.



American Far Right activities does have some distinct geographic patterns. Figures 2 and 3 (below) are heat maps showing the prevalence of spontaneous and planned far-right incidents across the United States. Spontaneous and planned far-right activity occurs most frequently in California (20.3 percent), New York (10.7 percent) Illinois (6.7 percent) and Florida (5.21 percent). Also planned attacks seem to be more frequent in states with highly diverse populations, such as California (10.5 percent), Texas, (8.1 percent) and Florida (6.1 percent).





Overall, we identified 2,642 perpetrators in our dataset. They include 165 unknown juveniles (6.24 percent), 900 unknown adult perpetrators (34.07 percent), and 1,577 known perpetrators (56.69 percent). The total number of spontaneous perpetrators is 1,908. Spontaneous perpetrators include 117 unknown juveniles (6.13 percent), 804 unknown individuals (42.14 percent), and 987 known perpetrators (51.73 percent). Spontaneous far-right activity averages 2.376 perpetrators per incident. Our control group of planned attacks comprises 734 perpetrators, which includes 48 unknown juveniles (6.54 percent), 96 unknown adult individuals (13.08 percent), and 590 known perpetrators (80.38 percent). Planned criminal attacks attributed to far-right ideologies and ideological groups average 1.963 perpetrators per incident (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Perpetrator Information

	Total Number	Unknown Juveniles	Unknown	Known	Average Perpetrators Per Case
Spontaneous	1908	117	804	987	2.376
Planned	734	48	96	590	1.963
Total	2642	165	900	1577	2.245

#### *Explanatory Models: Environmental Impact*

Understanding the drivers of spontaneous far-right violence requires that we examine how such incidents differ from planned attacks. Thus, we ran four logistic regression models. The first model included only formal political predictors. These predictors included the percentage representation of the Republican Party in the State Governorship, the State House of Representatives, and the State Senate.[61] Our second model examined variables related to the social and familial environment of the perpetrators, such as the cities/town's/county's demographics, the individual median age, family size, gender, and religious identification. The third model examined economic predictors, including poverty demographics, the unemployment percentage, educational attainment, crime rates, and median individual income. The last model included all the explanatory variables (see Table 4).

The first model indicates that as the percentage of Republican representation in the State House of Representatives increases by one percent, the odds of a far-right incident being spontaneous, as compared to planned, decreases by approximately 2 percent, controlling for all other variables in the model. This may indicate that as the political system seems to be less supportive, and potential costs of violent operations rise, far-right groups are less inclined to engage in violent practices.

**Table 4:** Logistic Regression Predicting Spontaneity (\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001)

Variables	Model 1: Political		Model 2: Social/ Familial		Model 3: Economic		Model 4: Full Model	
	Odds Ratio	Significance	Odds Ratio	Significance	Odds Ratio	Significance	Odds Ratio	Significance
Executive Control	1.173908	0.235					0.9593398	0.872
House Control	0.9741931	0.001**					0.9953422	0.798
Senate Control	0.9980647	0.796					0.9998382	0.992
Population			0.9999999	0.448			0.9999999	0.281
Pct. White			0.9468373	0.000***			0.9545682	0.021*
Pct. Black			0.9452249	0.000***			0.9401732	0.003**
Pct. His-panic			0.9702784	0.000***			0.9784209	0.106
Median Age			0.9957455	0.801			0.979168	0.618
Average Family Size			0.4860786	0.132			0.1103367	0.089
Pct. Male			0.9793117	0.607			1.080016	0.389
Pct. Cath-olic			1.009765	0.268			1.00171	0.886
Pct. Protes-tant			0.99159	0.323			0.9932691	0.533
Pct. Jewish			1.012558	0.505			1.034018	0.251
Pct. Indv. Poverty					1.050161	0.206	1.106073	0.144
Pct. Family Poverty					1.012076	0.786	1.029362	0.716
Unemploy-ment					1.038002	0.349	1.13953	0.06
HS Diplo-ma +					1.01537	0.31	1.031716	0.26
Bachelor's +					1.012366	0.272	0.976078	0.179
Violent Crime Rate					0.9994578	0.036*	0.9994585	0.144
Property Crime Rate					0.9999416	0.268	0.9999568	0.599
Median Income					1.000077	0.000***	1.000141	0.000***
Constant	6.88177	0.000***	10518.81	0.003**	0.0383504	0.017*	0.2383363	0.79
N	1168		891		779		542	
Pseudo-R2	0.0198		0.0628		0.0881		0.1881	

Thus, spontaneous attacks may serve as an alternative for those individuals who are still interested in engaging in violence. The second model examines predictors that relate to the social characteristics of the perpetrators' environment. As can be seen, the only significant explanatory variables are related to the size of minority groups. There is a negative correlation between the size of the White, Hispanic, and African-American population and the odds of the attack being spontaneous. The third model, which focuses on socio-economic explanatory variables indicates a negative correlation between violent crime rate and the odds of a far-right incident being spontaneous. In contrast, we found a positive correlation between the region's median income and the odds of a far-right incident being spontaneous. Lastly, the fourth model which includes all the explanatory variables identified in the three main explanatory factors. As with the case of the second model, here as well there was a negative correlation between the size of the white and African American population and the tendency of attacks to be perpetrated spontaneously. Also, as the median income of individuals in a location increases by one unit, the odds of a far-right motivated incident being spontaneous, as compared to planned, increases by close to one percent.

#### *Explanatory Models: Perpetrators' Characteristics*

Perpetrators of planned and spontaneous far-right activities garner minimal media attention. Except for a few notable cases, such as Eric Rudolph and Timothy McVeigh, the media primarily reports on the occurrence of an incident and the dissolution of the criminal case if one exists. As a result, we found our data limited due to a lack of available open sources. To extract some results from the available data, we utilized simpler statistical analyses (i.e., bivariate, and descriptive statistics) to analyze how perpetrator's characteristics correlate with their inclination to engage in spontaneous attacks (vs. pre-planned ones). We split the results into two sections. The first will examine the bivariate association between various perpetrators' demographics and incident type. The second examines the bivariate association between the characteristics of the perpetrator's criminal case and the incident type (see Tables 5 and 6).

Regarding perpetrator demographics, spontaneous actors are statistically significantly younger, less educated, less likely to be married, but more likely to have children than their planning counterparts. More specifically, spontaneous perpetrators were, on average, 24.68-years-old and planning offenders were, on average, 32-years-old, at the time of the incident. Additionally, perpetrators of planned attacks were twice more likely to have achieved a high school diploma or equivalent certification or to be employed (at the time of the incident) in comparison to the perpetrators of spontaneous attacks.

**Table 5:** T-Test of Perpetrator Characteristics

	Incident Type	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean	T-Value	Significance
Age at Time of Incident	Planned	579	32	14.776	0.614	10.561	0.000
	Spontaneous	929	24.68	9.797	0.321		
Length of Sentence	Planned	306	137.016	186.704	10.6732	6.051	0.000
	Spontaneous	1819	72.242	35.2336	0.8261		

To conclude, spontaneous perpetrators seem to come from a lower socio-economic background as they are usually younger, less educated, and more prone to be unemployed than perpetrators of planned attacks. Also, not surprisingly, spontaneous perpetrators are less likely than planned offenders to be members of extremist or hate groups. Roughly 80 percent of those perpetrators who had planned their violence were members of a hate or extremist group, compared to only 63.7 percent of spontaneous perpetrators.[62] This result is intriguing given the much higher frequency of spontaneous incidents than planned incidents, which could reinforce findings from previous research that identified the majority of hate-motivated offenses as not associated with hate groups.[63]

**Table 6:** Chi-Square Tests of Perpetrator Characteristics

		Incident Type		
		Planned	Spontaneous	Total
Did the Perpetrator Have Children? (N:118)	No	41.90%	20.00%	37.30%
	Yes	58.10%	80.00%	62.70%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 4.054	Cramer's V: 0.185	Significance: 0.044		
Perpetrator Marital Status (N: 165)	Single/Divorced/Unmarried	34.50%	19.20%	32.10%
	Partnered	20.10%	42.30%	23.60%
	Married	45.30%	38.50%	44.20%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 6.382	Cramer's V: 0.197	Significance: 0.041		
Plea Agreement (N:775)	No	41.70%	35.00%	39.10%
	Yes	58.30%	65.00%	60.90%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 3.535	Cramer's V: 0.068	Significance: 0.060		
Perpetrator Occupation (N:215)	Unemployed	16.70%	3.00%	10.20%
	Student	25.40%	61.40%	42.30%
	Employed	57.90%	35.60%	47.40%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 31.757	Cramer's V: 0.384	Significance: 0.000		
Prior Correctional Sentences (N:116)	No	29.40%	3.20%	22.40%
	Yes	70.60%	96.80%	77.60%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 8.957	Cramer's V: 0.278	Significance: 0.003		
Hate Group Membership (N:669)	No	19.40%	36.30%	27.70%
	Yes	80.60%	63.70%	72.30%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 23.940	Cramer's V: 0.189	Significance: 0.000		
Perpetrator Education	Did not Complete High School	33.70%	63.40%	48.50%
	High School/Equivalent Completion	62.70%	32.90%	47.90%
	Higher Education Degree/Certifcate	3.60%	3.70%	3.60%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Chi-Square: 15.106	Cramer's V: 0.303	Significance: 0.001		

## Discussion

In this study, we have explored spontaneous terrorist attacks or incidents where the perpetrator engaged in a politically motivated violent event or property offense without the element of premeditation. More specifically, we examined if spontaneous attacks are more likely to occur in a specific socio-political environment or by perpetrators with distinct characteristics. We found that community-level racial characteristics are significantly related to the presence of spontaneous terrorist attacks committed by individuals who are motivated by far-right ideology. The racial and ethnic diversification of a local environment increases the likelihood that far-right motivated individuals will react spontaneously.[64] However, increases in the African American population do not drive spontaneity. This result appears to indicate that while African Americans may be the targets of spontaneous violence and property damage, the Far-Right primarily reacts to the presence of other racial minority groups with an intensification of its violent acts. While most environmental, socio-economic factors showed no significant relationship with spontaneity, we did identify a positive correlation between the median individual income in a location with the odds of a spontaneous attack. Areas with higher median income tend to experience higher levels of spontaneous attacks. This result is counterintuitive because the increasing income in a location should result in declining stress on a local populace. However, examining the background of the individual perpetrators may provide some clarifications.

Spontaneous perpetrators, compared to perpetrators of planned attacks, are not only spontaneous in their terrorist activity, but also in their lives. Spontaneous perpetrators are younger and less educated than planning perpetrators. They are also more likely to have served time in correctional facilities before the incident, even given their youthful age (in comparison to perpetrators of planned attacks). These results indicate that spontaneous perpetrators are more socially and economically marginalized within their communities than perpetrators of planned attacks.

An overall examination of our results uncovers a few important dynamics. Locations undergoing demographic diversification, related to 'other' racial categories, are likely to experience increases in spontaneous far-right violent activity. Changes in racial demographics, linked with increasing median individual income, results in the socially and economically marginalized to feel strain regarding their present socio-economic status. The perpetrators of spontaneous far-right activity who are observing their community changing, leaving them culturally and economically behind, are more inclined to manifest their frustration when they face a social situation that contradicts their underlying political beliefs.

While the characteristics of the perpetrator's criminal case are not directly related to the perpetrator's demographics, the case information indicates how the United States responds to these incidents. Spontaneous perpetrators receive statistically significantly shorter correctional sentences than their counterparts. While spontaneous incidents are usually targeting immigrants and ethnic minorities, law enforcement and the court-system sees the perpetrators as less of a threat than the perpetrators of planned incidents. This is a matter of special concern since law enforcement is unlikely to prevent spontaneous activity, as compared to planned attacks. As a result, these incidents always involve an actual victim, as compared to a 'potential' victim when planned attacks do not materialize.

The results of this study lead to two broad policy findings. The first is the failure to designate spontaneous acts by members of the American Far Right as terrorism. Presently, both the American public and law enforcement do not view these cases as politically-motivated violence, even given their apparent targeting of a particular ethnic demographic and/or specific religious or political groups. When given a designation, law enforcement refers to these incidents as 'hate crimes' rather than terrorism. In the existing hate crimes literature, some scholars refer to spontaneous 'hate crime,' in which a trigger causes the perpetrator to act without prior planning. [65] However, this literature does not address the characteristics of spontaneous hate crime but addresses the criminal implications and legal ramifications of hate crime legislation, with special attention to the rehabilitation of hate crime offenders.[66] We seek to advance this literature by arguing that designating these events as only hate crime leads the American media, law enforcement, and political establishment to blur the political

motivations behind the act since hate crimes are reflecting the domestic politicization of politically motivated crimes. Attacks on a person or property because of the victim's political, social, or religious characterization is a form of political violence, regardless of its premeditation and deliberation. Therefore, the United States ought to adapt to these findings and identify politically motivated criminality regardless of the perpetrator's political, religious, or social motivation as terrorism.

The second finding emerging from our study involves the lack of accessible and available data. While we expected to experience data limitations among unknown perpetrators, we found data limitations across identified perpetrators and even also when seeking to identify spontaneous cases from the larger dataset. The lack of attention that law enforcement, courts, and the American media give to these cases clouds our comprehension of the perpetrators and the incidents. Often, the data we found originated in a small number of local news stories, which discussed the incident and reported about the conclusion of the criminal case. As a result, American society lacks awareness to the proliferation of spontaneous political violence.

Future research should seek to advance our findings in three areas. The first is to expand on the missing data within this work to identify perpetrators, victims, and incident characteristics to provide a more in-depth understanding of the differences between planned and spontaneous terrorist attacks. Similarly, more in-depth case studies of individual incidents may shed additional analytical or theoretical light on the foundation of spontaneity in political violence. Additionally, scholars studying hate crimes should use our results to further their work into spontaneous hate crimes, going beyond just a consideration of the implications of hate crime legislation regarding planned and spontaneous hate crimes. Finally, the exploration and identification of the spontaneity of political violence should not stop with the American Far Right. This phenomenon may yield significant opportunities for analysis of other ideological movements within and outside of the United States.

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- [56] We calculated the representative percentage of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and 'Other' religious congregations. The ARDA only collects data during census years. Thus, cases, where data originated from a year other than 2000 and 2010, do not have religious data.

[57] The United States Census asks questions regarding both racial and ethnic composition. Therefore, the other racial category represents all other racial groups beside white and black. The United States Census considers Hispanic an ethnic category and thus it does not account for a racial category.

[58] We relied on LexisNexis and Google searches to identify relevant sources.

[59] Perliger, Koehler-Derrick, and Pedahzur, "The Gap between Participation and Violence: Why We Need to Disaggregate Terrorist 'Profiles'."

[60] The total case number included all incidents where we coded information on the environmental or perpetrator case information. We excluded cases from the offender information when we were unable to identify the number of perpetrators. Additionally, we excluded cases from the environmental data when we were unable to identify the location of the incident through the United States Census Bureau or if the incident occurred prior to the digitization of United States Census Bureau records.

[61] In the United States, only the State of Nebraska deviates from this structure. They have a unicameral state legislature and a State Governor. In the legislature, there are no party identifiers, thus, the state of Nebraska is missing when we include House Control and Senate Control in the model.

[62] This result is likely artificially higher due to the source of our data on this variable. Writers are unlikely to highlight the absence of hate group membership. As a result, we coded this variable in the affirmative or negative only when news publications expressly stated the perpetrator's affiliation or lack of an affiliation.

[63] Gerstenfeld, *Hate Crimes: Causes, Controls, and Controversies*; McDevitt, Levin, and Bennett, "Hate Crime Offenders: An Expanded Typology"

[64] In our analysis, our racial demographics included White, African American, and Other. The logistic regression excluded "other" due to issues of multicollinearity. Therefore, our racial analysis is the measured groups in comparison to the "other" category. Therefore, as the population of White persons increases, the likelihood of spontaneity decreases, which implies that as the "other" category increases, the likelihood of spontaneity increases.

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