Proposed Title

Defending the Race: The Politics of White Violence in the U.S.

Project Description

The events of the 2021 Capitol Riot shocked many Americans, but there remain plenty of people that continue to defend and justify those violent actions. This is not the only instance of violent action to receive widespread support. Groups like the Proud Boys and figures like Kyle Rittenhouse have generated large followings and received encouragement from some major political personalities. Apparently, even shocking acts of political violence are not universally condemned within the American public. In order to understand how acts of violence have received such a veneer of respectability, this manuscript conducts a systematic study of both perpetrators and supporters of different forms of White racial violence. While many accounts of racist violence dismiss it as deviant, fringe, or even apolitical, this project challenges those assumptions. White racist violence instead emerges against the backdrop of many White Americans' perceptions of a broader racial project, one that they share with its perpetrators. This broader context not only serves to situate racial violence away from the margins and into the mainstream of American public opinion, but it demonstrates how, in the minds of many Whites, racial violence can be justified and condoned.

Defending the Race also makes a valuable contribution towards understanding how faith in political institutions shapes support for racist violence. While many White Americans support forms of racist violence, they often question whether such violence needs to be done in extra-legal or criminal ways, such as through terrorism and anti-government activities. Instead they set their faith in law enforcement to pursue a similar racial project. Whites with more extreme politics have less confidence in the government to preserve their racial privilege and turn instead towards exactly those forms of extra-legal violence, perhaps even taking up the racial project by themselves. It is not the support for violence which is questioned, but the type of violence, and this decision depends on how much faith individuals have in government institutions to uphold their perceived racial interests.

These distinctions provide valuable insight into understanding the contemporary period. Many violent extremist groups, such as the Proud Boys, claim to be upholding the existing American system, while other more radical groups see the U.S. government as coopted by racial enemies. Most Americans condemn racist mass shootings and terrorist attacks, but many refuse to overtly condemn Proud Boy activities or vigilante violence. It is through a similar paradoxical logic that the Capitol Riot was perpetuated by individuals waving American and pro-police flags, while committing sedition and assaulting law enforcement officers. Clearly, contemporary White violence defies labels of "pro" or "anti" government, making a more nuanced account necessary to understand the complexities of extremist behavior. *Defending the Race* provides such an account by showing how White Americans evaluate violence and various political institutions according to their ability to promote White interests. Thus, it makes sense to see Capitol Rioters, who had some faith in Trump's ability to promote White interests, assaulting Congress and targeting politicians, such as Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi, all of whom they saw as inimical to White interests, without relegating them to being simply anti-government or pro-Republican.

In developing these theories, *Defending the Race* showcases an innovative mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analyses, including causal inference and machine learning, with extensive fieldwork in online pro-White communities. Because the goal of the text is to understand the

substantive issue as thoroughly as possible, the various methods complement each other, balancing between untangling qualitative nuances and inferring generalizable findings. These methods leverage a variety of datasets. Survey data from major national surveys provides an important tool for understanding how Whites are motivated to support forms of racial violence, but this is complemented by analyses of my passive observation in online communities which ranged from more "mainstream" groups on Reddit to more extremist neo-Nazi groups on Gab and Telegram. Moreover, because extremists are notoriously difficult to study, the manuscript also derives insights from machine learning models created with hate crime data, thematic analyses of terrorist manifestos and videos, and the results of my active, covert participation into one White extremist group in particular.

The first section of the manuscript, comprising Chapters One through Three, focuses on the psychology of White members of the mass public who support or tolerate political violence. This section argues that violence must be seen as embedded within the context of White attachment to privilege and racial hierarchy. After reviewing historical and theoretical accounts of Whiteness and its concomitant violence, this section turns to a mixed methods approach that combines extensive field work in online pro-White communities with statistical analysis. It shows how some Whites see racial violence as a legitimate response to perceived racial threats and as a form of collective self-defense. It also demonstrates how many Whites evaluate State violence for its ability to manage and quell these threats, concluding by emphasizing the commonalities among White support for violence, choosing the sort of violence seen as most conducive to realizing perceived racial interests.

The second section, comprising Chapters Four through Six, turns to examine White extremists more specifically, using a variety of tools to understand what motivates extremists to use violence and what impact their hostility to the State has in these motivations. This section contends that racial violence, which is often seen as random, simply criminal, or in various ways "non-political," can actually be seen as decidedly politically and as part of broader social efforts to maintain the racial hierarchies discussed in the previous chapter. Not only do hate crimes rise and fall in response to national political trends, but they are generally pursued by overtly political White extremist groups. The same is true of extremist terror attacks and mass shootings whose justification is intertwined with the worldviews and motivations of other White extremists but also the more "mainstream" Whites who see violence as self-defense and affirm the State's authority to use similar brutality.

Defending the Race thus reveals how support for various forms of violence stems from a common sense of shared White racial interests. While Whites may disagree on whether the Capitol Riot was justified or whether the police serve White interests, they analyze these forms of violence through a similar lens. It is this same lens that extremists, who have lost faith in established institutions, also justify hate crimes, extremist organizing, and even mass shooter terrorist attacks. This violence, therefore, does not emerge from the margins of society but from broader structures of Whiteness and the attachments that many Americans have to the privileges, status, and sense of community that Whiteness has offered.

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Introduction: The Rise of the Alt-Right

This section serves as an introduction to the manuscript but also situates contemporary events, including the rise of the alt-right and prominent acts of extremist violence into a broader historical and political context. This serves to set up arguments about how anti-government activities like the Capitol

Riot, vigilante violence, and domestic terrorism are intertwined, and it helps show how the current period of racial violence both fits within mainstream trends of racial politics and emerges against a historical backdrop of racist and extremist violence throughout American history.

Chapter 1: The Violent Evolution and Maintenance of Whiteness

Given the importance of historical context, this chapter is dedicated to examining how the historical development of Whiteness as a racial category produced racist violence and how the tenuous nature of that category continues to necessitate violence for its maintenance. First, I examine prominent ideas in the history of White racial formation, looking at how the incorporation of the Irish into Whiteness and the challenges posed by slavery created a form of racial identity that is flexible and necessitates ongoing revision. This boundary between Whites and non-Whites has historically demanded the consistent use of violence to affirm Whiteness and suppress or distinguish those perceived as racial Others.

Often this process takes place through institutional and State-centered means, but is also one that many Whites collectively participate in, either to support the State or to resist State interventions seen as inimical to White interests. However, I argue that the contemporary period is particularly marked by many Whites' perception that the State has failed to enforce these distinctions. With rising immigration, political representation for people of color, and changing cultural norms, the separation underlying Whiteness is in particular crisis, leading to the proliferation of violence and the many complexities that this manuscript seeks to disentangle.

Chapter 2: White Justifications and Racial Violence as Self-Defense

These complexities are analyzed in this chapter which explores how Whites perceive political violence in the United States. While I find through statistical analysis that a generally small subset of White Americans admit to supporting violence as a political tactic, those that do consistently see their race as important to their identity and political outlook. Moreover, by drawing from my own field work, I contend that this data likely understates support for political violence, as many discussions of the Proud Boys, Kyle Rittenhouse's shootings, and even the Capitol Riot deny that they constitute violence.

Moreover, while many people have a desire to distinguish extremists from more "mainstream" White Americans, this chapter critically examines that presumption, finding that not only are notions of White identity closely tied to racism and support for violence but also that both extremist and mainstream Whites often offer strikingly similar justifications when they both support violence. Whites across this divide often describe violence as a form of self-defense or as being provoked by hostile and violent racial Others. What marks extremist support for violence is not the support itself but the anti-establishment nature of it, where it is frequently framed as a way of opposing far-reaching conspiracies and a hostile government.

Chapter 3: Are They Working for Us? Police, Immigration, and the Republican Party

Building on the findings of the previous chapter, Chapter Three turns more explicitly to the relationship between White racial identity and support for political institutions, especially those premised on the use of violence. By again pairing statistical work with my own field work, this chapter looks at how attitudes towards law enforcement and border security intersect with racial attitudes, finding that many Whites evaluate the use of such institutions based on their efficacy towards promoting pro-White interests. For example, Whites motivated by pride in their racial identity generally support police, but only if they believe that police generally favor Whites.

While a great deal of attention has been paid to the right-wing associations of contemporary extremist violence, this chapter brings out the nuanced reality of such a relationship by interrogating the relationships between White racial identity, conservatism, and support for the Republican Party. *Defending the Race* argues that extremist associations with the right-wing of the United States are born out of racially-motivated Whites leveraging the institutions that they believe best able to advance racial interests, although for many extremists this results in disillusionment and anti-establishment attitudes. It is not as simple as saying that conservatives support racial violence, as liberals motivated by White racial identity do so as well. In evaluating the Republican Party, just as with law enforcement, many Whites ask whether the party promotes their interests, and with the case of Trump, support it for that reason.

Chapter 4: Hate Crimes as Political Violence

In transitioning to the second section of *Defending the Race*, this chapter is devoted to the study of hate crimes in the United States using over-time statistical models and machine learning algorithms. Crucially, it contends that hate crimes must be seen as forms of political violence whose significance can only be understood from within the larger national political context. It shows that hate crimes spike in response to major national events, especially those related to Donald Trump, indicating a level of violent enthusiasm for the candidate. Similarly, instead of emerging out of the local demographic or economic context, this chapter contends that hate crimes are most reliably linked to organized hate groups, like the Proud Boys. Rather than seeing hate crimes as random, apolitical acts of irrational violence, they must instead be seen as perpetrated by organized, politically engaged actors with an eye to national events.

Chapter 5: Racist Terrorism within a Broader Context

Hate crimes are not the only prominent form of White extremist violence in the United States. Instead, this chapter grapples with some of the more horrifying and nationally captivating moments of mass shootings and extremist terrorism of the last half decade in order to understand how these must be seen, again, not as stochastic, random acts of violent deviancy, but as planned terrorist attacks with a clear aim to enforce racial hierarchy and privilege. This chapter closely analyzes video recordings and writings by recent extremist terrorists and situates them against the conversations that extremists have in private spaces, derived from my field work, about this same violence, its utility, and its political purpose.

Chapter 6: Whiteness and the Creation of Exclusionary Communities

This chapter focuses more specifically on my immersion within one online hate group which I was able to join without disclosing that I was a researcher. In culminating the arguments of the section, this chapter analyzes their behavior and communications in order to discuss how they developed an exclusionary approach to community building by cultivating a sense of personal discipline. This process was crucially tied to support and preparation for violence, oriented against hostile out-groups, an untrustworthy government, and deviant "race traitor" Whites. While there have been previous scholars that interviewed or engaged in field work within extremist groups, this is one of very few examples of access without the need to disclose researcher status, and such unprecedented access gives an opportunity for an unfiltered and unique view of these groups and their perception of racial politics in the United States. Extremists in this group saw violence and belonging in similar ways as those discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Because they perceived the government as hostile to Whites, this group

constructed a series of norms for extremist Whites to uphold in order to ensure that they would use violence effectively and judiciously to advance racial aims.

Conclusion

The manuscript's conclusion ties together the many findings of the previous chapters and synthesizes the two sections in order to present a more general framework for how to understand White violence and extremism in the contemporary context. By seeing movements and groups like the Proud Boys within the broader context of racial politics and the history of extremism, we can see that perpetrators of White racial violence are not fringe deviants but are instead a central feature of Whiteness and American racial history more broadly. Moreover, the current prominence of extremist violence demonstrates ongoing problems in efforts to combat racism and promote a more diverse democracy, problems which require a deeper interrogation into Whiteness and White political behavior.

Data Sources and Methods

Defending the Race takes a mixed-methods approach and thus draws from a variety of data sources. The first chapter is primarily historical and theoretical and draws from texts by Omi and Winant, W.E.B. DuBois, Michel Foucault, and Achille Mbembe. These are paired with a discussion of contemporary research on race and political extremism in order to provide a cohesive framework within with the rest of the manuscript operates.

A great deal of the research done in Chapters Two and Three derives from the statistical analysis of survey data provided by the American National Election Survey. This primarily consists of multivariate regressions, including the analysis of interaction effects. However, Chapters Two and Three's quantitative analysis is supplemented by the results of my field work. This component of my field work involved joining a series of online sub-communities deemed "pro-White." These communities consist of forums such as Reddit, Gab, Telegram, and an independent extremist website. Many of these groups, as Chapters Two and Three discuss, are more "mainstream," while others are increasingly overt in their racist tendencies. Both of these chapters distill my own work within these groups, attempting to showcase prominent discourses and lines of reasoning across these groups.

Chapter Four transitions to an analysis of federal hate crimes data provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This data was paired with extensive demographic information outlined in the chapter, including data from the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Southern Poverty Law Center, MIT Election Data and Science Lab, Beck Tolnay Lynching Database, U.S. Religious Congregations and Membership Study, and the Census Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances. The hate crime data is subjected to machine learning techniques, primarily elastic nets, in order to determine what predicts increased levels in hate crimes. Similarly, interrupted ARIMA models and difference-in-difference equations are used to further analyze predictors for increased hate crimes.

Chapter Five serves as a more qualitative chapter and involves thematic coding of a series of extremist manifestos that are either publicly available or made available as part of my field work. This process is paired with further discussions, akin to those in Chapters Two and Three, from pro-White sub-communities to analyze how extremist mass shootings are described, criticized, or praised. Finally, Chapter Six focuses on my immersive field work within one community, but this community is a private one that I gained access to through a vetting process with group members. This chapter describes the

community using interpretive methods in order to further understand how extremist groups discuss violence.

Readership

Extremist violence consistently captures headlines and general attention, so *Defending the Race* is broadly targeted to people who are already interested in this phenomenon. The subject is relevant to many fields and would appeal to political scientists, other scholars interested in the subject, undergraduate and graduate students, and members of the broader public. The methodological pluralism showcased in the text allows it to speak widely to scholars of various subfields and enables a wide variety of applications in the classroom, while the important and timely nature of the subject matter contributes to its general appeal.

Initially, this manuscript appeals to fellow political scientists, especially those that study political behavior and racial politics. There is a growing trend in research on racial violence, hate groups, and right-wing populism, as evidenced by several panels at the upcoming American Political Science Association conference, and this manuscript provides a timely and important contribution to that trend. This manuscript also engages closely with some of the prominent questions in political science, namely the role of race and group identity in social and political movements. This brings it into dialogue with many landmark books in public opinion, as well as ongoing research in political psychology and racial politics.

Second, *Defending the Race* engages in dialogue with research from fields beyond just political science. While the question of racial violence is increasingly under focus in political science, historians and sociologists have had a sustained interest in similar questions for quite some time. By engaging with literature in other fields, the text helps connect gaps between the disciplines and serves as a contribution to a broad array of disciplinary fields which each attempt to understand more about these substantive issues.

Third, the importance of its substantive focus will also allow the book to serve well in the classroom, and different chapters can be assigned depending on the context of the course. For instance, a course that specifically looks at extremist groups could emphasize the discussions in Section Two, while one that builds more closely on public opinion research would instead assign chapters from Section One. This same process holds for the methodological pluralism at play, as a theorist may gravitate to Chapters One and Six, while a specialist in quantitative methods could use Chapter Four as an example of applied machine learning.

Finally, there is a clear appetite among mainstream readers for a book like this. Many members of the general public have shown great interest in better understanding issues of racial violence, and this book is sufficiently accessible and grounded in contemporary events that it would be able to appeal to such an audience. Prominent acts of racist violence consistently seize public attention, as Americans struggle to understand the motivations behind actions as shocking as the Capitol Riot or extremist mass shootings. While *Defending the Race* adds valuable contributions to academic literature, it also seeks to understand real-world events and can be an effective analysis of those events even for those members of the public that are less interested in academic theories.

Comparable Books

There has been an ongoing trend of recent books which seek to understand related questions about White racial violence in American politics. In political science, one prominent and related text is Ashley Jardina's *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). While that book focused sparingly on extremist groups, it was dedicated to understanding how many Whites act politically based on a desire to promote their racial group interests and shares a great deal conceptually and theoretically with my manuscript. This book received a great deal of attention in the field, earning the American Political Science Association's Robert E. Lane award for books in political science and became widely discussed in political science departments even well before its release.

Defending the Race stands alongside a series of texts that focus more explicitly on violence and extremist activity. Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep's *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment* (Columbia University Press, 2020) tracks commonalities between the contemporary pro-Trump movement and the wave of Ku Klux Klan activity that marked the 1920s. Similarly, Richard Fording and Sanford Schram's *Hard White: The Mainstreaming of Racism in American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2020) tackled similar questions in grappling with the racial motivations behind many Whites' support for the Tea Party and the Trump campaign. Finally, and most recently Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason's *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (The University of Chicago Press, 2022) confronts the intersection between partisanship and contemporary violence, emphasizing the importance of understanding events like the Capitol Riot.

Outside of political science, there are also several relevant books that have risen to prominence in recent years. Building on her *Bring the War Home* (Harvard University Press, 2018), historian Kathleen Belew also co-edited the invaluable *A Field Guide to White Supremacy* (University of California Press, 2021) with Ramón Gutiérrez, both of which help provide robust historical and theoretical frameworks for understanding contemporary extremist violence. These scholarly volumes have also been released alongside a surge of journalistic and mainstream books which review and detail important trends and moments in the contemporary extremist movement. Some of these books include *Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist* (Penguin Random House, 2018) by Eli Saslow, *Everything You Love Will Burn* (AK Press, 2018) by Vegas Tenold, and *The Age of Insurrection: The Radical Right's Assault on American Democracy* (Penguin Random House, 2023) by David Neiwert.

Defending the Race differs in significant ways from each of these texts, but the ongoing emergence of similar research demonstrates a widespread and broad interest for these ideas that goes beyond my field. Each of these books tackles an important element of the contemporary extremist movement or touches on how Americans come to support or embrace political violence. Instead, this manuscript presents a comprehensive analysis of how contemporary White extremism and political violence emerge amongst a sympathetic public opinion and stand alongside a long historical trend of support for such violence.

Author Information

Sean Long earned his PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Riverside and is an incoming Postdoctoral Associate at George Washington University. He devoted his PhD studies to the question of White racial identity and political extremism and has four publications related to race, extremism, and/or political psychology, including a recent solo-authored piece in *Politics, Groups, and*

Identities looking at extremist mobilization in response to Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. His co-authored work has also appeared in *Political Research Quarterly* and *Urban Affairs Review,* and he regularly participates in panels related to race and extremism at conferences held by the American Political Science Association and the Western Political Science Association.

Given the length of time he has read and immersed himself in White extremist sub-communities, Sean has a unique perspective and a level of access to extremist spaces that few other political scientists have achieved. This makes him particularly qualified to tackle this topic, as he is able to draw on years of following extremist discussions, in depth engagement with difficult subject matter, and conversations with extremists, in addition to an advanced and proven methodological skillset. He can be contacted at sean.long@email.gwu.edu.

Manuscript Specifics

The proposed manuscript is based on my dissertation and simply requires revisions and the addition of Chapters Three and Five, although all principal analyses have been completed for each of those. I also plan to incorporate additional analyses related to specific events such as the Capitol Riot, Rittenhouse controversy, Proud Boys indictments, the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, and reactions to the 2020 George Floyd Protests into Chapters Two and Three. The current manuscript, noting that Chapter Five of the original dissertation will not be included, stands at 163 pages and 52,284 words, while the completed draft aims for approximately 200 pages and 75,000 words. Currently, the manuscript has 16 figures and 10 tables, although I expect approximately 3 figures and 6 tables to be included in the additional sections. None of these require color.

In terms of timeline for completion, I would be able to finish the manuscript within the academic year. Because all principal analyses are completed for the remaining chapters, they simply need to be written and revised, and revisions of the remaining manuscript will not take a great deal of time. Because I am not waiting for funding or any other unresolved contingencies, the process of completion will be relatively smooth and predictable.