American Extremists?: “Real Americans” and their role in the January 6 Capitol riot

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Abstract

Many of the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, did not appear to be "extremists"—they instead appeared much more like normal Trump supporters. This presents a puzzle for analysing the political violence that took place on that day, as it appears extremist violence had been committed by non-extremists. I argue the best way to understand how this occurred is to consider it the result of a social movement to stop the certification of an election, where this social movement is on behalf of 'real Americans,' people who are white and Christian who believe the country is being taken away from them. My argument begins with a critical analysis of the concept of extremism, which finds that the "extremist frame" can obscure the relationship between the mainstream and extreme, when in reality the boundaries between the two are blurry. I then outline a theory, based in the social identity and social movement perspective, of 'real Americans' as people who feel threatened by demographic and cultural change. This theory intends to mitigate some of those conceptual issues while also providing a coherent way to understand why these people turned to violence on January 6, principally through the notion of collective action frames. Finally, I examine the events of January 6 and the weeks leading up to it, in order to understand how the frames for violent action were developed through the Stop the Steal movement, as well the interaction between the "normals" and the extremists in that movement. I argue Trump's speech on the ellipse was in alignment with the frames that had been developed in the Stop the Steal movement, and it proved to be effective for mobilisation to violence because it resonated with what 'real Americans' believe about their threatened place in America.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The capitol riot of January 6 was yet another example of growing far-right extremism in the United States.[1] While it was not the most violent act (in terms of deaths) that can be attributed to these movements, it was novel in that the perpetrators were comprised, at least in part, of the sorts of people present at more standard Trump rallies; people who are, ostensibly, not extremists.[2] As the Chicago Project on Security and Threats found in their analysis of those arrested for their actions on January 6 (as at January 1, 2022), only 14 percent had any affiliation with right-wing extremist groups.[3]

While acknowledging the leading role the more organised extremist groups, such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers played, Pape and Ruby, the primary authors of the CPOST research, diagnose the riot as "a new kind of violent mass movement in which more "normal" Trump supporters—middle-class and, in many cases, middle-aged people without obvious ties to the far right—joined with extremists in an attempt to overturn a presidential election."[4] The puzzle this presents is that it appears extremist violence has been perpetrated by people who are not really extremists. Had the majority of insurrectionists been members of extreme right-wing groups, the events of that day would have been shocking but perhaps not surprising.

The goal of this thesis is to understand how the "normals"—the term I will use to describe those seemingly regular Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol—came to take part in the events of that day. Specifically, my goal is to outline a theoretical model that can make sense of how the "normals" participated in political violence; what drove them to that extreme action, the motivations behind it, their justifications, and how they developed.

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[1] O'Harrow Jr., Ba Tran, and Hawkins, "Rise Domestic Extremism America."
[2] Pape and Ruby, "Capitol Rioters."
[3] CPOST, *American Face of Insurrection*, 12.
[4] Pape and Ruby, "Capitol Rioters."

I begin in chapter two by looking at the concept of extremism itself. What does that term mean? What does it imply about the people and the movements it is applied to? If the "normals" are not extremists, then is there something about them that is different from actual extremists? One solution to the puzzle of the "normals" might be to simply acknowledge they are extremists because of what they have done, no matter how different they seem to be from more typical right-wing extremists. But given their dissimilarity to other extremists, and the fact one of the central agents in the whole affair was a former president—a most unusual situation—a careful and critical analysis of the concepts around extremism provides a solid base from which to build a theory.

Building on the conclusions I draw from my conceptual analysis, in chapter three I outline a theoretical model of how the "normals" came to turn to political violence. The model is principally informed by the literature on extremism and radicalisation that draws from the social identity and social movement perspectives, and is chosen in part to avoid some of the conceptual issues outlined in the prior chapter. In short, I argue that the "normals" see themselves as 'real Americans'—that is, white and Christian—in a country that is changing demographically and culturally in a direction they do not like. In particular, they see these changes as a threat, to both their status and continued existence as prototypical Americans. Central to this sense of threat is the idea of "the great replacement"—a far right conspiracy theory that says shadowy forces are trying to replace the American electorate with immigrants from non-white countries. While this idea originates on the far right, its increasing presence in the mainstream has intensified the sense of threat 'real Americans' feel due to demographic change. The sense of threat on behalf of a social group is key to understanding how violence occurs. Those who engage in violence on behalf of their group see themselves as defenders, not as aggressors. For understanding how "normals" came to violence on January 6, this is an important insight, because it helps to explain how people who ordinarily would not use violence interpreted their use of it that day as legitimate.

In chapter four, I come to examine January 6 and the weeks that proceeded it, with an eye to using the theoretical perspective I outlined in the previous chapter to explain the motivations of the "normals" who broke into the Capitol that day. I examine Trump's actions and rhetoric around his insistence that he actually won the election, and that it was stolen from him. Trump is perhaps the most important figure in developing the potential for violence that day, whether or not that was his actual intention. Through his rhetoric and encouragement, the Stop the Steal movement was able to spread. This movement, I argue, was the focal point where extremists and "normals" first came into alignment. Thus anything that occurred on Janaury 6 cannot be understood without first examining how the movement developed in the weeks beforehand. Finally I turn to Trump's speech on the day. The narratives and frames he laid out in the speech he gave on the ellipse, I argue, aligned with the action frames that had been allowed to develop in the Stop the Steal movement, among both "normals" and extremists alike. Though Trump did not directly order anyone to storm the Capitol, when viewed through the lens of a 'real American,' the rhetoric he used sent a message that violence was necessary and justified.

Chapter 2: The conceptual lens of extremism

The terms 'extremism,' 'radicalisation,' and 'terrorism' are often used without explaining their meaning. Such usage suggests understanding of all three words is common knowledge, yet consensus definitions for all three are lacking.[5] Part of what makes defining these terms difficult from a social science perspective is the fact they are also used by a variety of actors for their own political ends, making them highly contested.[6]

Incautious use of terms can obscure the phenomena under study and leave implicit assumptions unexamined. In his 1986 treatise on the shortcomings of mainstream economics, Hyman Minsky wrote that "in all disciplines theory plays a double role: it is both a lens and a blinder."[7] For Minsky, the theoretical framework responsible for mainstream economics' usefulness in explaining some phenomena was also responsible for its deficiency in explaining others: "as a lens, [theory] focuses the mind upon specified problems, enabling conditional statements to be made about causal relations for a well-defined but limited set of phenomena. But as a blinder, theory narrows the field of vision."[8] The concepts of extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism are not immune to this effect. Questions about who is an extremist, how radicalisation occurs, the legitimacy of violence, and what constitutes terrorism depends on the theoretical framework adopted to analyse them.

Charles Tilly, writing on the limitations of the term 'terrorism,' argues that "in social science useful definitions should point to detectable phenomena that exhibit some degree of causal coherence—in principle all instances should display common properties that embody or result from similar cause-effect relations."[9] It is debatable whether 'extremism,' radicalisation,' and 'terrorism' have such objective phenomena at their core.[10] For example, the observation that "one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" appears often in the

[5] Striegher, "Violent-extremism: Definitional Dilemma," 75.
[6] Mudde, *Ideology of Extreme Right*, 10.
[7] Minsky, *Stabilizing an Unstable Economy*, 109.
[8] Minsky, *Stabilizing an Unstable Economy*, 109.
[9] Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," 8.
[10] Lindahl, "Conceptualising Violent Extremism," 41-43.

literature, though its implications are contested.[11] It is important, in other words, to appreciate the map is not the territory. In particular for my question in this thesis, getting a clearer handle on the concepts around extremism will help to determine whether part of the difficulty in understanding the "normals" and their use of political violence is due, at least in part, to some conceptual confusion.

Anthony Richards, argues "extremism, like radicalization, has limited analytical utility as a concept."[12] In a trivial sense this is true of all concepts, as there are limits to the contexts in which they are applicable. But Richards' broader argument is that the concepts (in this case, as understood by the U.K.'s Prevent strategy) fall short of what they are purported to do and from a counterterrorism perspective are therefore inadequate for understanding and countering terrorism.[13] To Richards, "it appears that 'terrorism', 'radicalization' and 'extremism' have increasingly become merged into a single discursive framework," one that obscures the phenomena in question and needlessly broadens the remit of counterterrorism.[14] Kundnani and Hayes display a similar concern when they write,

> Today, the terms 'radicalisation', 'extremism' and 'violent extremism' are bandied about with such frequency and abandon that they have become synonymous with terrorism itself, despite their quite different meanings, and the lack of clarity as to how these concepts relate to one another.[15]

This chapter will aim to explore and clarify these concepts, in particular with reference to the right in the United States. Cynthia Miller-Idris characterised January 6 as "a brutal assault fuelled by far-right ideas that had gone mainstream."[16] The mainstreaming of the far right—"the process through which previously extreme ideas become normalized as part of the

[11] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 878.; Guiora, *Tolerating Intolerance*, xxii.; Abbas, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 1.; Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 10.; Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism," 161.; Feddes et al., *Psychological Perspectives on Radicalization*, 22.; Hogg, Kruglanski, and Bos, "Uncertainty Roots of Extremism," 408.; Michael, *Right Wing Extremism USA*, 6.
[12] Richards, "From Terrorism to 'Radicalization'," 374.
[13] Richards, "From Terrorism to 'Radicalization'," 376.
[14] Richards, "From Terrorism to 'Radicalization'," 371.
[15] Kundnani and Hayes, *Globalisation Countering Violent Extremism*, 2.
[16] Miller-Idriss, "From 9/11 to 1/6," 56.

acceptable spectrum of beliefs within democratic societies"—has produced an environment where extreme ideas are encountered more often in everyday life.[17] I argue this has contributed to the blurring of boundaries between extreme and mainstream, boundaries which were somewhat unclear in the first place thanks in part to the conceptual haziness of extremism. As D. J. Mulloy argues "the dividing lines between the extreme right, the radical right, and conservatism are much less robust than many people would like to believe."[18] If there is a legitimate distinction between the "'normals" who stormed the Capitol and the extremist Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and Oath Keepers who joined them,[19] then the first step is to understand what that conceptual difference is.

While a consensus definition of extremism does not exist,[20] most share some common elements. In what I will call the 'extremist frame,' three in particular stand out: fringe positioning, anti-democracy, and political violence. These three elements of extremism are not always mutually exclusive, and definitions may contain one, two or all three. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list and some definitions may include more substantive and descriptive features, particularly when it comes to more particularised definitions of right-wing extremism.[21] My claim, however, is that at the core of most definitions of extremism in the literature (and in everyday language), these are the most important characteristics. Describing these features as an 'extremist frame' is not to denounce the concept prematurely—it is simply to make clear that these elements form a certain conceptual lens through which the world and certain political actors in it are seen.

[17] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 46.
[18] Mulloy, *Enemies of the State*, xiii.
[19] Pape and CPOST, *Understanding American Domestic Terrorism*, 11.
[20] Martini, Ford, and Jackson, "Introduction: Encountering Extremism," 13.
[21] For an outline of some of these definitions, see Mudde, *Ideology of Extreme Right*, 10-11.

The extremist frame

The first element is fringe positioning. On this view, extremism is "a generalized measure of deviance from the political norm"[22] or "a move away from the centre towards the extreme rather than an equilibrium position."[23] In other words, what is considered extreme is defined by its positional relationship with the mainstream; the further away from the centre of political gravity, the more extreme the views are considered. Julian Richards writes that "[a]n extremist, by definition, holds beliefs on the outer fringes of the 'mainstream,'" but that this relies on understanding both the spectrum of measurement and where the majority-endorsed centre is to be found.[24]

A shortcoming of this is that it paints views or political movements as extreme solely on the basis of whether enough people in society support it. Many views now seen as abhorrent were once believed by great majorities, and many ethical positions with relatively slim followings today may well in the future be considered common sense. Another weakness is its inability to account for extremists and extreme views that are thoroughly within the mainstream. Mulloy, for example, points out that Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater—who famously said "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice"[25]—are generally accepted as extremists, yet both operated within mainstream institutions.[26] Finally, it also complicates the notion of mainstreaming, for if extreme ideas are those which are only held by small minorities on the political fringes, then once those ideas enter the mainstream they are by definition no longer extreme.

Another reason fringe positioning seem inadequate for describing extremism is because in everyday language, extremism is understood to be a negative; the term is pejorative and disparaging.[27] Uwe Backes traces the cultural roots of this to ancient Greek ethics, where

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[22] Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 4.
[23] Breton et al., "Introduction," xiii.
[24] Richards, *Extremism, Radicalization and Security*, 17.
[25] Bay, "Extremism Defense of Liberty," 145.
[26] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 20.
[27] Hogg, Kruglanski, and Bos, "Uncertainty Roots of Extremism," 408.

moderation in politics was considered virtuous.[28] An accusation of extremism is usually more than just descriptive, aiming not only to point out the unpopularity of some politics, but also to dismiss them. Calling someone an extremist is a normative act, one which Mariela Cuadro argues is "aimed at changing not only the subjects' behaviour but also their beliefs."[29] In other words, to call someone an extremist is to condemn their views as illegitimate and exhort them to change. This explains, in part, why many resist the label when it is applied to them. Most of the right-wing extremists Hilary Pilkington interviewed for her ethnographic research denied their views were extreme or radical and instead claimed they were mainstream and centrist.[30] So long as their views are within the Overton window—the territory of the political landscape mainstream society considers acceptable[31]—some will consider the accusation of extremism as an unfair smear on their politics.

This brings us to a fundamental conceptual issue: extremism can be understood as either a descriptive or a normative term. Take abolitionism, for example. Once considered a fringe view confined to "cranks," "scolds," and "extremists,"[32] today slavery is almost universally condemned. In its normative sense, the accusation of extremism implies a view outside the legitimate sphere of political happenings, an ideology, policy, or behaviour that should not be a part of the democratic discourse. Yet to have the rightness or wrongness of a view tied to whether it is supported by enough of society at a certain time seems to miss something fundamental about the reasons we hold political positions in the first place. Abolitionism did not become a just, righteous cause solely as the result of mainstream support—it was right when Jefferson drafted an anti-slavery paragraph to be included in the Declaration of Independence, and it did not become wrong when it was eventually left out.[33] A label that simply identified views as unpopular would not be all that useful analytically. For that

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[28] Backes, *Political Extremes*, 175-76.
[29] Cuadro, "Knowledge, Power, Subject," 61.
[30] Pilkington, "Why Should We Care," 12.
[31] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 45-46.
[32] Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 40.
[33] Zinn, *A People's History*, 72.

reason, most definitions go beyond a merely a descriptive understanding of extremism and attempt to explain the normative factors inherent to extremism that make it undesirable.

The first normative concept in extremist frame is that extremists are anti-democratic. The modern roots of this perspective trace back to scholarship produced in response to McCarthyism, which forms what D. J. Mulloy calls "the orthodox school," a common way of understanding extremism.[34] While many scholars contributed, the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, Earl Raab, and Richard Hofstadter is of particular note, as it remains influential to this day.[35]

In their 1971 book *The Politics of Unreason*, Lipset and Raab argue extremism "means going beyond the limits of the normative procedures which define the democratic political process."[36] The "fixed spiritual center" of liberal democracy is pluralism: the institutions and structures of society that allow its diverse identities, ethnic groups, and ideas to peacefully co-exist. Extremism, in contrast, is anti-pluralist or monist; it is an approach to politics that views give-and-take as illegitimate, that is hostile towards separate spheres of power and institutions that protect minority rights.[37] Extremists are historical simplists; events in history are not attributed to a complex web of interacting causes but to simple and easily comprehensible ones. With their simplism comes historical moralism, "the tendency to believe that human events are totally shaped by the supremacy of good intentions over bad at any given moment, or vice versa."[38] Through this moralist and simplist lens, extremists see in history and current events not the messiness, mistakes, and compromises of a working pluralist society but the good events caused straightforwardly by good people and the bad ones caused by evil people. This leads directly to conspiracism. For the extremist, unfortunate events do not just happen—there is always a hidden hand, and Lipset and Raab employ Hofstadter's concept of the "paranoid style" to help explain it. Not be confused with

[34] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 17.
[35] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 17.; Brown, Mondon, and Winter, "Far Right and Mainstreaming," 3.
[36] Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 5.
[37] Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 6.
[38] Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 10.

paranoia in the clinical psychological sense, Hofstadter describes the paranoid style as a way of seeing the world, where those afflicted perceive an unyielding conspiracy to undermine and destroy the paranoid subject's nation, culture, or way of life.[39] Both Lipset and Raab, and Hofstadter acknowledge that conspiracies really do occur in political life, but that what is different in the extremist's understanding is the total comprehensiveness of the perceived plot.[40] "The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style," writes Hofstadter, "is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as the motive force in historical events."[41] This perspective leads to a certain mode of action in response, one that demands "not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade."[42] The mindset that tends to produce the paranoid style was earlier described in Hofstadter's 1963 book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, and it has similarities to Lipset and Raab's concepts of historical simplism and moralism. Hofstadter describes a "secularized fundamentalism" wherein the "fundamentalism of the cross [has been] supplemented by a fundamentalism of the flag."[43] The secular fundamentalist mind "looks upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, and accordingly it scorns compromises (who would compromise with Satan?) and can tolerate no ambiguities."[44] This essentially theological mindset leads to a kind of spiritual abstraction of politics, where the mundane give-and-take of everyday politics is secondary to a higher truth:

> The issues of the actual world are hence transformed into a spiritual Armageddon, an ultimate reality, in which any reference to day-by-day actualities has the character of an allegorical illustration, and not of the empirical evidence that ordinary men offer for ordinary conclusions.[45]

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[39] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style," 4, 29.
[40] Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 14.; Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style."
[41] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style," 29.
[42] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style," 29.
[43] Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, 131-34.
[44] Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, 135.
[45] Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, 135.

For Hofstadter, this mindset explains the extreme right's shaky relationship with facts and its unyielding marriage to conspiracy theorising.

The 'orthodox school' is normative because it defines the extremes in opposition to the moderate, pluralistic centre, which is considered good. Mondon and Winter argue that *The Politics of Unreason* "represented an attempt to psychopathologise and delegitimize the 'extremes' as lacking the reason and rationality of the political discourse of the mainstream democratic system, its procedures and values, and thus illegitimate."[46] As is clear from American history, the mainstream and its institutions have not always been oriented towards equality, justice, and democracy; in the wake of Reconstruction, consensus politics settled on the solution of black disenfranchisement for maintaining peace and stability right until the 1960s.[47] This disenfranchisement happened via "nominally democratic means," Richard Valelly notes, and the re-enfranchisement enabled by the Voting Rights Act only happened thanks to the "fierce struggle" of the civil rights movement.[48] As Mulloy argues, the orthodox school's concept of extremism not only obscures the value to the mainstream of such a framing—the mainstream and its political institutions become good by definition—but it also makes it more difficult to examine any common roots, ideas, and behaviours the extreme and the mainstream might share.[49]

Some attempt to circumvent the implicit idea in the orthodox school that any challenge to the mainstream and its institutions is extremist by making a distinction between radicals and extremists. Alex Schmid, for example, argues that while radicals and extremists share a fringe nature, there are qualitative differences between them. Where radicals advocate for sweeping changes to society that can be compatible with democracy and diversity, extremists want to create homogenous, societies based on rigid ideologies. Where radicals are open minded, extremists are closed minded. Extremists are never democrats and they tend to use violence to achieve their ends, whereas radicals sometimes use violence and sometimes do

[46] Mondon and Winter, *Reactionary Democracy*, Chapter 2.
[47] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 204.
[48] Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions*, 2-3.
[49] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 18-20.

not.[50] On this perspective, conceptual space is opened up for the possibility of non-extremist yet potentially violent fringe views in favour of greater democracy, equality, and justice.

Others criticize the pluralist understanding of democracy implicit in the extremist frame. Lipset and Raab consider the "open market place of ideas" to be at the heart of pluralism in democracies—it is the mechanism through which competing group interests are able to have their voice heard and their interests protected.[51] In order to win political power, compromises between coalition members must be formed. Whether this describes political reality accurately is debatable. "While pluralists conceive of alliance formation among groups with different priorities," write McVeigh and Estep, "we argue that different political interests—not just class interests—are arranged in hierarchies."[52] They argue different groups have access to different structural privileges, and coalitions are often therefore formed between privileged groups to preserve their higher position in the hierarchy.

These critiques are not meant to imply the "orthodox school" is wholly wrong, or the authors mentioned have not identified some aspects of extremism that have relevance to the question I am trying to answer. After all, the actions of the Capitol rioters were profoundly undemocratic and anti-pluralist. The point is that the orthodox school allows the mainstream to put all the negative features of extremism neatly into a box and say "all this bad stuff is over there, on the extremes." The shape of the conceptual lens used to examine extremism is therefore influenced by this unwillingness to consider the shared roots and features the mainstream and extreme may have. Mulloy argues that, for the orthodox school "to open up the investigation of extremist groups in order to reveal what the dominant culture had in common with them was to invite an unwelcome bout of self-examination."[53]

The influence of the "orthodox school" is visible in many works. In David Bennett's 1995 book *The Party of Fear*, he explains that "the passionate men and women who joined the right-wing groups that sought to check various alien enemies became extremists when they

[50] Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation*, 6-11.
[51] Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 6-7, 12.
[52] McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 61-63.
[53] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 32.

violated democratic procedures and moved outside the norms of a democratic society."[54] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's 2018 book, *How Democracies Die,* is premised on the idea that American democracy has relied on two unwritten norms to function: mutual tolerance—"the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals"—and institutional forbearance—"that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives."[55] In their analysis, political parties are the rightful gatekeepers of democracy; they have the responsibility to keep extremists at bay.[56] In light of a Republican Party which has neglected this duty, they write, "[The Paranoid Style] may be more relevant than ever."[57] In *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, David Neiwart writes that "in American public life there is an alternate dimension, a mental space beyond fact or logic, where the rules of evidence are replaced by paranoia,"[58] and in *Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy*, Cherian George argues the Tea Party is "the inheritor of the 'paranoid style' in American Politics."[59] The original analysis of the orthodox school is therefore still highly relevant to many understandings of extremism today.

The second normative concept in the extremist frame is that extremists are violent, or at least have the strong potential to be. Amos Guiora proposes extremism "be defined as 'conviction' that tenets of a given belief system—secular or religious—justify violence against others."[60] Schuurman and Taylor argue extremists see violence as legitimate, necessary, and effective for achieving their goals.[61] Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James consider an extremist ideology as one "that promotes the use of violence for the attainment of political, economic, religious, or social goals."[62] This view is not limited to academic definitions—most of the

[54] Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, 3.
[55] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 8.
[56] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 24-26.
[57] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 172-74.
[58] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 34.
[59] George, *Hate Spin*, 146.
[60] Guiora, *Tolerating Intolerance*, 6.
[61] Schuurman and Taylor, "Reconsidering Radicalization," 6-7.
[62] Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James, "Radicalization to Violence," 1067.

right-wing extremists Hilary Pilkington interviewed in her research denied the label, attributing it only to those who use violence or the threat of violence to impose their views.[63]

The centrality of violence in many understandings of extremism is often a reflection of the purpose for which the concept is being employed. Sedgwick describes three “official and semi-official contexts” in which radicalisation and the surrounding discourse is used: security, foreign policy, and integration. What is considered extreme depends on from which perspective the question is asked, as the utility of the term varies from context to context.[64] A government immigration body or NGO concerned with integration may judge extremism in a different manner to those whose concern with extremism is the security of the state and it citizens. Abbas argues the predominance of the security perspective and its task of countering terrorism distorts the understanding of extremism by emphasising the link between extremism and violence.[65] The fact many scholars and governments use the term “violent extremism,” however, suggests an implicit acknowledgement that violence is not a necessary element in the meaning of extremism—if it was, adding ‘violent’ to the front would be redundant. To understand extremism as exclusively violent misses an important distinction between extreme ideas and extreme actions.[66] This distinction is reflected in the literature on radicalisation, or how people become extremists, where it is known as “cognitive radicalisation” and “behavioural radicalisation.”[67] Most of the people who have extreme or radical ideas do not use violence to pursue them,[68] and even if people do have violent ideas, as McLaughlin and Robitaille note “empirical evidence suggests that holding violent ideas is in itself a bad predictor in the identification of individuals who will commit violent actions.”[69]

[63] Pilkington, "Why Should We Care," 13.
[64] Sedgwick, "Radicalization Confusion," 484-90.
[65] Abbas, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 15.
[66] Richards, "From Terrorism to ‘Radicalization’," 376.
[67] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 873.
[68] Borum, "Radicalization Violent Extremism I," 8.
[69] McLaughlin and Robitaille, "Radicalization Toward Violent Extremism," 3.

Many of the definitions put forward in the literature have all three elements of the extremist frame at their core. Manus Midlarsky's definition incorporates fringe positioning, anti-democracy, and violence:

> Political extremism is defined as the will to power by a social movement in the service of a political program typically at variance with that supported by existing state authorities, and for which individual liberties are to be curtailed in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of those who would actually or potentially disagree with that program.[70]

Hafez and Mullins employ all three elements of the frame when they describe an extremist worldview as "one that is rejected by mainstream society and one that deems legitimate the use of violence as a method to effect societal or political change."[71] Breton et al. note a possible synthesis definition that combines the different definitions used by contributors to their edited book:

> A person is more extreme, the further away her views are from the mainstream or center view, the less willing she is to compromise about them, the fewer alternatives to them she is willing to contemplate, the more salient they are to her, and the more willing she is to use violent methods in support of those views.[72]

Even in cases where extremism is used but not defined, the elements the extremist frame can be implicitly detected. For example, Julia Ebner doesn't explicitly define "extremist" in her book *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*. That she understands extremists as anti-democratic and fringe is implied when she writes "my day job [working in a counter-extremism thinktank] comfortably keeps me within the bubbles of those in charge of upholding the status quo rather than those attacking it" and that counter extremism is a "cat-

[70] Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism*, 7.
[71] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle," 960.
[72] Breton et al., "Introduction," xiii.

and-mouse game between those who try to disrupt and destabilise our democracies and those who seek to protect them."[73]

Extremism, political violence, and terrorism

Extremism as a concept works to delegitimise people and groups whose ideas and actions are considered beyond the acceptability of mainstream society. In doing so, the extremist frame tends to obscure the similarities between the mainstream and the extreme. One place where there is inconsistency is with respect to political violence. My intention here is not to advance an argument for or against the legitimacy of political violence—that is beyond the scope of this project. There are positions that endorse at least some political violence as legitimate; Ted Honderich, for example, argues "democratic violence," his term for political violence in pursuit of freedom and equality, may sometimes be defensible.[74] The extremist frame, however, does have a position on political violence, and that position is that it is illegitimate when used by non-state actors, yet it is often considered legitimate when used by states.[75] My contention, then, is that the extremist frame uses inconsistent standards with respect to political violence. The United States has used violence for political purposes—for example, in the revolutionary war—and depending on the definition, terrorism—for example, the bombings of Japanese and German cities in World War II—and broadly considered it justified. This is not to argue those instances of violence are in fact unjustifiable, but merely to point out that the extremist frame tends to evaluate violence inconsistently, and viewing the political world through the extremist frame therefore has consequences for how violence in that world is interpreted. To look at January 6 through the lens of the extremist frame requires clarity on the assumptions and limitations of that frame for understanding political violence.

[73] Ebner, *Going Dark*, 2.
[74] Honderich, *Essays on Political Violence*, 90-116.
[75] Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 70.

The form of political violence often associated with extremism is terrorism. George Michael, for instance, writes that "it is axiomatic to say that terrorism is usually perpetrated by extremists."[76] Terrorism, however, does not have a consensus definition.[77] As with extremism, however, there are common elements most definitions possess. Chris Wilson, for example, identifies a near-consensus definition as "violence against civilians (according to various definitions by either non-state or state actors) designed to communicate a message to a broader audience so as to achieve a political or other purpose."[78]

Neumann writes that "with terrorism, there is an objectively definable core—a violent tactic, sometimes a strategy, which can be distinguished from other means and modes of pursuing violent conflict."[79] However, while the violent act itself is a "brute fact," Richard Jackson argues, terrorism is a "social fact" and "is not a causally coherent, free-standing phenomenon which can be identified in terms of characteristics inherent to the violence itself."[80] The intentions of the perpetrator, the circumstances of the violence, and who exactly is labelling the violence, he argues, are all integral factors in understanding an instance of violence as terrorism or not. Jackson gives the example of killing civilians; if killed unintentionally during war, in a military operation gone wrong, that is not necessarily an instance of terrorism.[81] Butler takes a further step, arguing all violence is interpreted, which is not to say violence is subjective but rather that it "appears within frameworks that are sometimes incommensurable or conflicting, and so it appears differently—or altogether fails to appear—depending on how it is worked over by the framework(s) at issue."[82] For example, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton point out the labelling of violence in American history was always in favour of the mainstream: "In the

[76] Michael, *Right Wing Extremism USA*, 2.
[77] Jackson, "In Defence of 'Terrorism'," 117.
[78] Wilson, "Ubiquity of Terror," 389.
[79] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 878.
[80] Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 75.
[81] Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 75.
[82] Butler, *Force of Nonviolence*, 14-15.

wars between the white settlers and the 'Indians,' a battle won by the Cavalry was described as a 'victory.' The 'Indian's' triumphs, however, were 'massacres.'"[83]

In addition to its conceptual murkiness, terrorism is also a highly politicized term. What makes something an instance of terrorism in everyday language is often more about who is committing the violence and what 'side' they are on, rather than any inherent features of the violence itself. C. A. J. Coady notes in a 1985 paper that the mujahadeen in Afghanistan, who at that time were fighting the Soviet Union, were "seldom if ever referred to as terrorist in the Western Press."[84] This changed once it was the United States and other western allies occupying the country,[85] a phenomenon Coady attributes to the unstated assumption that revolution against "us" is considered de facto illegitimate, whereas revolution against the enemy is just.[86] This inconsistency of labelling leads some to argue in response, such as Anthony Richards, that to have more analytical utility, terrorism ought to be understood in a neutral sense, and "conceptualized as a particular method of violence, regardless of the ideological cause in whose service it is deployed"[87]

The inconsistency with which the term terrorism is used extends beyond disagreements over which non-state groups, actors, or movements are terrorist in nature. A more consequential shortcoming of the discourse is that despite some acknowledgment that terrorism can be committed by states and non-state actors alike, terror at the hand of the former is often absent from the conversation. A literature review by Richard Jackson found in most of the texts examined, "the central concept of the field—terrorism—is conceptualised and understood solely or primarily as a form of illegitimate non-state political violence."[88] State terrorism, in the words of Abbas, becomes "invisible in the discourse," which can end up legitimising state violence.[89] Critics therefore see the discourse on terrorism as hypocritical and self-serving. Noam Chomsky, for instance, argued shortly after 9/11 that the

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[83] Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 36.
[84] Coady, "The Morality of Terrorism," 63.
[85] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 10.
[86] Coady, "The Morality of Terrorism," 63.
[87] Richards, "From Terrorism to 'Radicalization'," 375.
[88] Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 70.
[89] Abbas, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 17-19.

United States itself is a major source of international terrorism, and that western powers could therefore “never abide by their own official definitions of the term,” as doing so “would at once reveal that the U.S. is a leading terrorist state, as are its clients.”[90]

C. A. J. Coady argues that different moral standards are often used to judge the violent actions of one’s own state compared with the actions of non-state actors or other states. This usually runs in the direction of justifying state terrorism by appeal to utilitarian considerations that weigh up the potential benefits of terrorism against the immorality of killing non-combatants.[91] Coady points to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the area bombings of German cities during World War II, and their at least semi-successful ‘justification’ on utilitarian grounds.[92] For better or worse, the same standards are not usually applied to non-state actors. The inconsistency can be resolved in either direction—utilitarian considerations extended to non-state actors, deontological principles against terrorism extended to states[93], or the pacifist view that all violence is illegitimate applied to both state and non-state actors alike.[94] Though they are not the terms he uses, Coady’s idea of utilitarian principles being applied only in the case of state violence and terror maps on to what I have called the extremist frame; the state (which is perhaps the most mainstream institution of all) uses violence in ways that are often considered justified, whereas non-state actors, or extremists, are not evaluated to the same standards. Note this criticism of the extremist frame does not rely on advocacy of the position that non-state actors ought to be able to use violence in the same way as the state; it is compatible with that view, though it is equally compatible with the view Coady adopts that says state violence ought to be judged with the much stricter principles usually reserved for non-state actors.[95]

The invisibility of state violence in the extremist frame, and the goal-oriented stance much research of extremism and terrorism is conducted with further contributes to the

[90] Chomsky, *September 11*, 84-89, 16.
[91] Coady, "The Morality of Terrorism," 57-58.
[92] Coady, "The Morality of Terrorism," 56.
[93] Coady, "The Morality of Terrorism," 58.
[94] Ford, "Pacifist Approach Countering Extremism," 115.
[95] Coady, "The Morality of Terrorism," 56-57.

ideological contours of the discourse. Abbas argues the absence of state terrorism from the discourse "leads to certain limitations to questions that can be asked of independent, objective research, which, in the end, is unable to hold states to account."[96] In other words, given the knowledge of terrorism and extremism is often created with policy or security goals in mind, the constraints of what it is possible to do within those structures influences the focus and shape of the knowledge produced. For example, in a paper outlining some of the psychological processes involved in terrorism, and their implications for counterterrorism, John Horgan writes the following:

> Despite the increased discussions of root causes of terrorism, we can do little in a practical sense to change the 'push' factors (i.e., the broad sociopolitical conditions) that give rise to the increased likelihood of terrorism. In contrast, counterterrorism programs may be more effective in concentrating on the 'pull' factors (or 'lures'), since they tend to be narrower, more easily identifiable, and specific to particular groups and contexts.[97]

The 'we' Horgan refers to in this passage are the people involved in counterterrorism. It can be read as an implicit acknowledgement that, given the limited sphere of power security agencies have in liberal democracies and the need for them to produce results, the focus is necessarily going to be on those things they can potentially influence, not necessarily those factors that are considered root causes. I do not point this out to criticize Horgan specifically; his is just a prominent example of even where limitations are acknowledged, the policy-oriented environments within which much of the terrorism and extremism literature is written has implications for the knowledge produced. Martini, Ford and Jackson, argue this is in part responsible for "an established dynamic within the discourse and understandings of terrorism, namely, that of neglecting the political causes, the inequalities of societies and the socio-economic causes that may bring individuals to embrace violence."[98]

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[96] Abbas, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 19.
[97] Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 90.
[98] Martini, Ford, and Jackson, "Introduction: Encountering Extremism," 13.

This critique should not be understood as a kind of 'whataboutism,' where the harms of non-state actor violence are diminished just because state violence is potentially responsible for more. It is also not to unduly criticise those who do not focus on state actors (this project largely being such an example). Jackson is careful to point out there is nothing inherently wrong with focusing on non-state actor violence, and that scholars who do so are not acting in bad faith.[99] Marc Sageman, for example, acknowledges states and non-state actors alike are capable of political violence, and that state violence has caused orders of magnitude more harm than non-state violence. He nonetheless focuses on non-state actor violence not out of fealty to the state, he argues, but because it is more difficult to understand and requires a novel explanation.[100] However, if the conceptual tools used to analyse non-state actor violence are so constructed that they are blind to state violence, or even see it as always legitimate,[101] then non-state political violence can come to be treated as its own special kind of violence, divorced from a context where it is sometimes a response to state violence, and instead appearing to erupt out of nowhere. There are potentially good reasons for thinking the state ought to have the monopoly on violence; in the ideal liberal democracy, the state is under the control of the people, and its institutions provide non-violent recourse for solving disputes between sub-state actors. History, however, is replete with examples where the state uses its monopoly on violence against its people. After all, 'terrorism' once referred mostly to state violence, in particular during the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France, and then later in Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union.[102]

"American history books," writes Peter Neumann, "are full of reminders that many of the rights and freedoms now taken for granted were fought for by individuals who were condemned as dangerous 'radicals' by their contemporaries."[103] Those struggles have often involved violence, both between sub-state groups fighting each other, and sub-state groups

[99] Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 78.
[100] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 13-14.
[101] Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 70.
[102] Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," 8-9.; Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 13.
[103] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 877.

fighting against states. The extremist frame would convict some of these actors as extremists and terrorists, despite parts of contemporary mainstream society now seeing their views and actions as legitimate. It cannot be forgotten, for example, that the United States only exists thanks to a violent revolutionary war, mainstream narratives about which William Huntting Howell argues "create the difference between 'Revolution' and 'Rebellion,' between 'freedom fighting' and 'terrorism.'"[104] The violence of the American revolution, Holger Hooke argues, "has been subject to whitewashing and selective remembering and forgetting."[105] Patriots used "campaigns of terror" to get loyalists to support the revolution.[106] Richard Maxwell Brown argues riotous mob violence was common during the revolutionary era, in part because it had a history of being effective.[107] Though the colonists' considered their violent actions justified, the British did not. H. T. Dickinson argues British imperialists rejected the Americans' right to take up arms in the fight for independence partially on the grounds that the colonists' "radical" claim that sovereignty ultimately lay with the people was based on a misguided and dangerous theory of natural rights and the equality of man.[108] This theory is central to the idea of America and forms the intellectual basis of the Declaration of Independence.[109] It also, argues Brown, served as a justification for violence: "[t]he idea of the 'sovereignty of the people gave an ideological and philosophical justification and awesome dignity to the brutal physical abuse of killing of men that tarring and feathering, vigilantism, and lynching came to embody"[110] In some sense, then, 'extremist violence' was instrumental in gaining America's independence, yet the extremist frame would likely reject such violence as illegitimate.

This critique of the extremist frame's way of analysing violence is not intended to imply that the violence seen on January 6 is legitimate. The point is instead that the extremist frame has a certain way of looking at violence which relies on a judgement of which violence

[104] Howell, "Starving Memory," 94.
[105] Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, xiv.
[106] Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, 12.
[107] Brown, "Violence and American Revolution," 82-97.
[108] Dickinson, "Britain's Imperial Sovereignty," 90-92.
[109] Lepore, *These Truths*, 98-99.
[110] Brown, "Violence and American Revolution," 103.

is legitimate and which is not. To therefore argue the violence seen on January 6 was illegitimate—which I do—has to come from a certain perspective. In my judgement of January 6, that perspective emphases the anti-democratic nature of the violence. That is unlikely to be controversial, but for clarity of analysis it is useful to acknowledge all the same.

Mainstream, extreme, and American history

The purpose of the extremist frame is to draw the line between what is acceptable and legitimate political conduct, and what it is not. "While moderation is described as a peaceful, flexible and democratic way of acting and being," writes Mariela Cuadro, "extremism is portrayed as being violent, rigid and undemocratic, these two notions working together securing the meaning of one another."[111] The relative nature of the concept means where the borders between mainstream and extreme lie differ depending on who is asked. In the context of western states, the extremes are usually defined relative to the precepts and norms of pluralist liberal democracy. However, the extremist frame can obscure what the mainstream and the extreme have in common. Mulloy argues "the pool of ideological resources employed by the extreme right exists not just on the margins, as the orthodox school would have us believe, but in the very fabric of America's mainstream ideology."[112] On this view, the pervasiveness of the extreme right in America is seen less as an aberration of American culture and more simply as another group trying to define what it means to be American.[113] David Bennett advances a similar argument when he writes "the Americans of the Right were never monarchists, dreaming of a new aristocracy of the estates. They were not fascists, plotting to overthrow the nation's institutions and replace them with some sinister new order. They were, instead, Americanists par excellence."[114] The right-wing extremists Bennett describes saw their America as threatened—an America founded as a

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[111] Cuadro, "Knowledge, Power, Subject," 69.
[112] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 30.
[113] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 30.
[114] Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, 7-8.

Garden of Eden cleaved of the inequalities that plagued the old world, a place where every person could succeed through hard work and cultivating their unique talents.[115] It was an America they believed once existed yet in their time seemed to be lost. But the American exceptionalism that informs this perspective is shared to varying degrees by mainstream and extreme alike. To be clear, this is not to say there are no differences between the two, but that extremism has to be understood as being informed by the mainstream society it comes from, and as such the boundaries between the two can be hazy. As Michael Cox argues, “right-wing extremists are not exactly political fish swimming in friendly waters,” but “there is no insurmountable ideological wall separating them from a large swathe of their fellow white citizens.”[116]

In other words, the extreme right in America is not alien. In the post-911 environment, a perspective emerged where the extremist frame, alongside a Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations”[117] view of world affairs, placed Islamic extremists as ‘the other’ in an existential struggle against the best of ‘the West’—freedom, democracy, secularism, and liberal human rights.[118] The value or otherwise of that perspective aside, right-wing extremism does not fit neatly into that analytical frame—right-wing extremists look much more like ‘us’ than any ‘them.’ As Lane Crothers writes, “the ‘new’ extreme right in American politics [. . .] is, indeed, as American as apple pie.”[119] To acknowledge what the mainstream and extreme have in common is not to deny their differences—it is meaningful to talk of extreme right-wing ideas becoming mainstream,[120] which would not be the case were they the same thing. Yet the concept of mainstreaming is arguably more coherent when the boundaries between mainstream and extreme are recognised as vague, ever-changing, and to some extent overlapping.[121] The difficulty of this, of course, is that while it might be straightforward to recognise a Nazi as a member of the extreme right, and a fiscal conservative as belonging to

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[115] Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, 7-12.
[116] Cox, "Beyond the Fringe," 287.
[117] Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?."
[118] Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, 243-44.
[119] Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 4.
[120] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 46-47.
[121] Mondon and Winter, *Reactionary Democracy*, 114-22.

the mainstream right, there is an expanse between them that does not yield to such easy classification. As Cas Mudde argues, the increasing presence of the far-right in mainstream territory "has made the borders between the radical right and the mainstream right [. . .] more and more difficult to establish."[122] Mulloy writes, in a similar vein, that "[t]he clear demarcation between 'mainstream America' and 'extremist America' is very difficult, on several levels, to maintain."[123] The sometimes hard-to-pinpoint nature of the distinction, however, does not mean the distinction is not useful. As Quassim Cassam points out, someone who argues the term 'extremist' should be abandoned will need some other concept to describe the common beliefs, mindsets, and actions people we call extremists appear to share.[124] The alternative is to deny there are any such common beliefs, mindsets, and actions that extremists share. This, I contend, would be a step in the wrong direction. Extremism is a hazy, relative, and socially constructed concept, but it is not incoherent. Acknowledging the limitations of a conceptual frame and identifying the implications of those limitations does not amount to denying its usefulness in pointing to recognizable phenomena in the world. I would contend that "extremism" meets Tilly's need for social science concepts to have "some degree of causal coherence"[125]—though it would be fair to say that the "some" in that sentence is doing a lot of work. Despite his acknowledgement that a clear demarcation between the two is difficult, Mulloy nonetheless argues "[d]espite the problems associated with defining extremism from the mainstream perspective, this, it seems, is the only workable approach."[126]

Being aware of a concept's limitations and blind spots at the very least makes it easier to understand why some things are not well illuminated by its application—as seems to be the case with the "normals" who took part in January 6. This is evident when trying to find the line between the mainstream and extreme; the shared body of values and ideology often presents confusing and tricky propositions that are not easy to resolve. Consider the

[122] Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 23.
[123] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 20.
[124] Cassam, *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis*, 9.
[125] Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," 8.
[126] Mulloy, *American Extremism*.

following from Cox and Durham: "[I]t would be quite misleading to assume that all those who manipulate race for political purposes are extreme rightists. If this were the case, then we would have to place Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George Bush in the extremist camp."[127] They go on to explain the essentially racist character of the extreme right and its connection to white supremacy and white nationalism—views that Nixon, Reagan, and Bush did not endorse and are therefore not extremist. Yet their disinclination to consider "manipulating race for political purposes" as extreme can be read as them avoiding a qualitative factor that would accuse a president of extremism. To call a president an extremist seems like an oxymoron—after all, a large proportion of the country voted for them—but this confusion comes from the rigidity of the extremist frame and its presentation of a binary distinction where one does not exist. Cox and Durham do seem to be cognisant of this when they explain how Pat Buchanan suggested the Republican party manage David Duke's rise by adopting all they could from his platform without compromising their own. This, suggests Cox and Durham, that "the relationship between mainstream conservatism and the extreme right might be seen as two-way traffic."[128] This view is disputed by others—George Michael argues "[o]ne should not confuse the far right as an extrapolation of the conservative right wing. [. . .] The far right is a different entity."[129] A view of the far right as strictly distinct from the mainstream, however, makes it difficult to account for the apparent relationship between the two.

The difficulties in parsing mainstream from extreme are not limited to political actors. In 2019, Vice reported that in a company-wide internal meeting at Twitter, a technical employee explained the content filters they had developed for taking down white supremacist posts were ensnaring some Republican politicians. The explanation was in response to another employee's question asking why this content was still able to spread on their platform, when they had fairly successfully purged the network of ISIS-related material. The technical employee explained that where society accepted Twitter's strong

[127] Cox and Durham, "The Politics of Anger," 288.
[128] Cox and Durham, "The Politics of Anger," 305.
[129] Michael, *Right Wing Extremism USA*, 3.

approach to ISIS-related content sometimes flagging innocent accounts as the price to pay for purging the harmful material, it would not permit a similarly robust response against white supremacist content that could ban politicians.[130] Where Twitter apparently finds it easy to draw clear lines with the Muslim "other," the ambiguity between extreme and mainstream is more readily acknowledged when dealing with domestic or "western" affairs.

Law enforcement has also struggled to find a line when it comes to white right-wing violence—so much so that it has often not considered it 'extremism' at all.[131] Priya Dixit argues the sentences for extremist incidents perpetrated by whites are typically much lighter than those for people of colour and Muslims. She notes in comparing the outcomes in the Bundy Ranch case, where armed militants stood-off against the government over unpaid federal grazing fees, and the nine Somali-American teens arrested in 2014 for trying to travel to Syria and fight for Islamic State, it was the latter who received prison sentences up to 30 years, where charges were dropped for most involve in the former.[132] In the time since 9/11, many more Muslims have been charged with terrorism offences, despite some evidence that white extreme-right violence has taken more lives during that period.[133] Mike German argues this cannot be blamed on any inadequacies in the law regarding domestic terrorism, and that the lack of far-right violence prosecuted under the already existing domestic-terror statutes is therefore a matter of choice by the Department of Justice and the FBI.[134] The idea that law enforcement is "blind in the right eye"[135] has some historical validity. One example of this is can be seen in the priorities the FBI chose for their COINTELPRO programs in the mid-twentieth century. Their own assessments led to spy on, disrupt, and discredit civil rights activists, black nationalists, and anti-war protestors; the Ku Klux Klan, however, was only added to their roster of targets in 1964 at the behest of Lyndon Johnson—the only addition to the programs to come from outside pressure.[136] Yet with time, priorities can change.

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[130] Cox and Koebler, "Twitter White Supremacy Banning."
[131] Dixit, "Extremists or Patriots?," 222.
[132] Dixit, "Extremists or Patriots?," 222-26.
[133] Norris, "Right-wing Terrorists Charged," 519-20.
[134] German, "Learning From Our Mistakes," 170-71.
[135] Bjørgo and Ravndal, *Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism*, 15-17.
[136] Bermanzohn, "Violence, Nonviolence, Civil Rights," 160.

Recent comments from the FBI director suggest the aversion to tackling right-wing extremist violence may be dissipating.[137]

At least some of the blindness can be explained by the political backlash law enforcement received from both the extreme and mainstream right. On the extremes, the Ruby Ridge and Waco incidents provided fuel for the reactionary fire of the 1990s militia movement.[138] Waco was also a precipitating factor in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, which remains the deadliest terror attack in the United States aside from 9/11; 168 people were killed and more than 500 were injured.[139] Media speculation in the immediate aftermath pointed to Islamic extremists as the culprits,[140] though the perpetrator was soon discovered to be Timothy McVeigh, a right-wing extremist with connections to (depending on the terminology) the militia, white-power, and patriot movement(s).[141] Kathleen Belew argues it was in reaction to the negative perception of Ruby Ridge and Waco, along with an earlier failure to convict white power activists in the 1988 Fort Smith sedition trial, that the Department of Justice and elements of the FBI shied away from framing the Oklahoma City bombing as part of the broader white power movement.[142] In the public eye thereafter, the bombing came to be understood as the actions of one man with his own unique and particular grievances, rather than someone with deep connections to a greater right-wing social movement.[143] Nonetheless, a speech from President Clinton linking the attack to a media and political climate where "promoters of paranoia" freely and popularly launched hateful and divisive rhetoric was taken as an attack on mainstream conservatism by figures such as Rush Limbaugh, the talkback radio host.[144] David Neiwert argues this response from Limbaugh and his ilk stifled any burgeoning discussion about the increasing mainstream presence of extreme right ideas.[145]

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[137] Naylor and Lucas, "Wray Stresses Right-Wing Extremism."
[138] Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 34.
[139] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 15, ix.
[140] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 57.
[141] Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 15, 68.; Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 210.; Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 59.
[142] Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 211.
[143] Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 211.
[144] Purdum, "Clinton Condemns 'Promoters Paranoia'."
[145] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 60-61.

A similar reaction from the mainstream right occurred in response to a 2009 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) memo outlining the increasing risk of right-wing extremism.[146] The memo, titled "Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment," explained while the DHS had no specific information about right-wing extremist violence being planned, the recent financial crisis and the election of the country's first Black president presented new opportunities for radicalisation and recruitment, and created an environment with some resemblance to the 1990s, where increased activity of right-wing extremists was observed.[147] Conservative bloggers, television personalities, and politicians reacted with outrage, taking the report as evidence the government saw all conservatives as extremists and wanted to intimidate members of the then-burgeoning Tea Party movement.[148] The report was rescinded and two years after its release, the unit within the Department of Homeland security responsible for its creation had been "effectively eviscerated."[149] Daryll Johnson, the author of the memo, warned in a 2017 *Washington Post* opinion piece that federal agencies were still ignoring the rising threat of right-wing violent extremism, and attributed this lack of attention to fear of political backlash and those agencies' view of terrorists as almost exclusively Muslim.[150]

Though the intention of the conservative backlash was to try and ridicule as hysterical the 'liberals' who would portray as extreme those political views they saw as obviously normal and acceptable[151], in some ways they demonstrated precisely what they aimed to refute—that there is significant overlap and compatibility between mainstream conservative views and more odious elements of the extreme right. There is another irony in this reaction, and that is the implicit acknowledgement that the extremist frame can create "suspect communities."[152] Those elements of right-wing media most upset about the focus on right-wing extremism took no second thoughts in spreading the idea that to be Muslim in itself

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[146] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 120-26.
[147] Department of Homeland Security, *Rightwing Extremism*.
[148] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 125-26.
[149] Smith, "DHS curtails terror analysis."
[150] Johnson, "I Warned Right-Wing Violence."
[151] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 124-25.
[152] Silva, "'Radicalisation Journey Concept' Revisited," 35.; German, "Learning From Our Mistakes," 174.

was worthy of suspicion and already somewhere on the road to terrorism.[153] Yet when they see the possibility—however disconnected from reality that perception may be—of such sweeping indictments threatening to judge them in a similar fashion, they begin to see the injustice of such ways of thinking.

Similar sentiments about conservative persecution can be heard from elements of the right today, in particular from Tucker Carlson. A line in Joe Biden's inauguration speech mentioned the new administration's goal of combating political extremism, white supremacy, and domestic terrorism; from this, Carlson spun a narrative that argues the definition of white supremacist has been dishonestly inflated to ensnare everyday conservatives, and that the new administration will use this as justification to "hunt for people who may criticize them."[154] Once again, Carlson perhaps reveals more than he knows when he argues that mainstream conservatives seem to have some shared traits with white supremacists.

It would be a mistake to consider "conservatives" as a suspect community from the security perspective—as stated above, extreme ideas do not lead inexorably to violence. But while there are differences between mainstream conservatives and right-wing extremists, the extremist frame does not provide a particularly focused lens for distinguishing between the two in times like the present when ideas and violent actions once confined to the fringes are being pursued from within the mainstream.

The extremists of January 6

The difficulty in understanding the actors who stormed the Capitol on January 6 speaks to the limitations of the extremist frame. On the one hand, members of right-wing groups present such as the Three Percenters and the Proud Boys[155] fit reasonably well into the extremist frame. The "normals," by contrast, present a much more difficult conceptual

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[153] George, *Hate Spin*, 165-66, 69.; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, 132.
[154] Carlson, "War on 'White Supremacy'."
[155] Crothers and Burgener, "Insurrectionary Populism?," 5.

problem, because despite the anti-democratic and violent actions they displayed on that day, in many ways they appear more like the vast numbers of regular Trump supporters than they do members of extremist groups. Is it right, then, to call those “normals” who entered the Capitol on January 6 extremists? There are plausible arguments for thinking so. To take the most straightforward interpretation of the extremist frame, the January 6 rioters were acting against the institutions of liberal democracy. Their goal was to disrupt the certification of a free and fair democratic election. Even if it was accepted that political violence is sometimes justified—for example, Honderich’s idea of democratic violence[156]—the actions of the January 6 rioters would not be considered legitimate as they were based on the lie that the election was stolen. To be sure, they may have thought they were acting in defence of democracy, but believing it does not make it so. Right-wing extremist movements have often considered themselves defenders of democracy; at a Ku Klux Klan rally in the 1920s, the Grand Dragon of the time told the crowd that “[e]very [government] official who violates his oath to support the constitution by betrayal of the common welfare through any selfish service to himself or to others spits in the soup and in the face of democracy.”[157] While it can be argued the institutions of democracy as they exist in the United States fall short of a democratic ideal,[158] the January 6 rioters were not fighting to move the country closer to any such goal. Finally, participants in the January 6 riot fit the current FBI and DHS definition of a domestic violent extremist: “an individual based and operating primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States who seeks to further their ideological goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence.”[159] While the FBI is not the philosophical arbiter of who or what is extremism or terrorism, the current director has stated they consider January 6 an instance of domestic terrorism.[160]

On the other hand, care should be taken not to paint with too broad a brush. There were permutations of culpability within the people participated in the broad events of January 6:

[156] Honderich, *Essays on Political Violence*, 90-116.
[157] McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 2.
[158] For arguments of this kind, see Grayling, *The Good State*.; Dahl, *How Democratic American Constitution?*
[159] FBI and DHS, *Domestic Terrorism*
[160] Naylor and Lucas, "Wray Stresses Right-Wing Extremism."

not everyone at the Trump rally went to the Capitol; not everyone who went to the Capitol fought police to shift the lines backwards; not everyone on the stairs in front of the Capitol, behind the initial police line, entered the building; not everyone who entered the building did so in a physically violent way. On the other hand, collectively the mob functioned to violently intimidate members of Congress; for a member of that mob to argue they did not engage in violence and were therefore being unfairly associated with extremists, as did Robert Reeder, a now convicted January 6 participant,[161] ignores any notion of collective responsibility.

Looking beyond the events of January 6, is it fair to consider Trump's most avid supporters—MAGA folk—to be extremists? Though it is undoubtedly painting with a broad brush, an argument can be made for seeing the answer as yes. McVeigh and Estep argue that Trump's election represented "a [white nationalist agenda] that not only entered our political discourse, but found a warm reception from Americans, most of whom did not think of themselves as political extremists."[162] While they may not consider themselves extremist, the fact a set of political views is widely supported and by the President should not absolve it from extremism, unless extremism is meant only in the thin sense that denotes poorly supported views on the political fringes.

Is it fair to consider the Republican Party in its current form extremist? It does not use violence, but sometimes that is not necessary to meet anti-democratic ends. Steven Levitsky, author of *How Democracies Die*, recently argued the Republican Party has "become an anti-democratic force" and that it is not clear whether they are "willing to accept defeat anymore."[163] As with 'extremism' itself, what makes a party a right-wing extremist party lacks a consensus definition.[164] Yet as Mudde notes of extreme right parties: "we seem to know *who* they are even though we do not exactly know *what* they are."[165] In other words, identification of extremists seems to be easier than explaining what it is exactly which makes

[161] Shepard, "Capitol Riot Suspect Sentencing."; CBS Baltimore Staff, "Robert Reeder Sentenced."
[162] McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 11.
[163] Riccardi, "'Slow-motion insurrection'."
[164] Mudde, *Ideology of Extreme Right*, 10.; Michael, *Right Wing Extremism USA*, 3.
[165] Mudde, *Ideology of Extreme Right*, 7.

them so. Given that most Republicans in Congress will not openly criticize Trump for his continued insistence that the election was stolen, it is fair to see the party as being complicit in Trump's extremist anti-democratic actions. The few Republicans that have spoken out can perhaps see the problem most clearly. Liz Cheney, a Republican congresswoman, wrote critically of Trump and her party in a *Washington Post* opinion piece:

> Trump is seeking to unravel critical elements of our constitutional structure that make democracy work — confidence in the result of elections and the rule of law. No other American president has ever done this. [. . .] The Republican Party is at a turning point, and Republicans must decide whether we are going to choose truth and fidelity to the Constitution. [. . .] While embracing or ignoring Trump's statements might seem attractive to some for fundraising and political purposes, that approach will do profound long-term damage to our party and our country. [. . .] We must be brave enough to defend the basic principles that underpin and protect our freedom and our democratic process.[166]

Trump's remarks after the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville demonstrated even he struggles to coherently parse the extreme from the mainstream within his base. His temperate efforts to condemn Neo-Nazis and white nationalists were overshadowed by his insistence that there were "very fine people on both sides:"

> I've condemned neo-Nazis. I've condemned many different groups. But not all of those people were neo-Nazis, believe me. Not all of those people were white supremacists by any stretch. Those people were also there because they wanted to protest the taking down of a statue, Robert E. Lee.[167]

[166] Cheney, "GOP Turning Point."
[167] The New York Times, "Transcript: Trump's News Conference."

Trump may be right that some of the people present did not consider themselves neo-Nazis or white supremacists. But given how clearly their views and interests aligned with the neo-Nazis and white supremacists, it becomes difficult to see Trump's insistence that some of the people present ought to escape moral condemnation as anything other than empty rhetoric. It appears to be a distinction without a difference.

> If you look, they were people protesting very quietly the taking down the statue of Robert E. Lee. I am sure in that group there were some bad ones. The following day, it looked like they had some rough, bad people, neo-Nazis, white nationalists, whatever you want to call them. But you had a lot of people in that group that were there to innocently protest and very legally protest.[168]

Trump is of course correct that people have the right to peaceful protest. The first amendment guarantees it, even for abhorrent views. There are arguments that question the societal value of such laissez-faire approaches to free speech,[169] but nonetheless, the first amendment as it stands protects hate speech as it does any other speech. However, in defending the Charlottesville protestors, Trump's condemnation of the violence only served to highlight the fact he did not condemn what the violence was in pursuit of. Anti-democratic movements that are non-violent (which after January 6, Trump's base cannot fully lay claim to be) can still be dangerous. As Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, democracies not only die through violent coups—they can also be destroyed from within, by democratically elected leaders who slowly but surely backslide their countries into autocracy. Mainstream political leaders and parties—and the bases of support that sustain them—can ruin democracy through the ballot box, in a manner that is "less dramatic but equally destructive" as extremist violence.[170]

"People's representations of social categories are clearly embedded in explanatory theories—social ontologies—that are consequential for their evaluations of them," write Haslam,

[168] The New York Times, "Transcript: Trump's News Conference."
[169] Waldron, *Harm in Hate Speech*.
[170] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 2-8.

Rothschild, and Ernst.[171] The social category of extremist should not be understood in an objective sense, as a phenomena with clear criteria and a shared essence that all extremists possess. The concept is relative and hazy. That does not mean labels of extremism are arbitrary, meaningless, or random; as Julian Richards argues, in the context of a modern liberal democracies, "it seems far from inappropriate to suggest that violent actions which seek to target democratic institutions and dehumanize selected citizens of the state should properly be described as extremism."[172] That said, the limitations of the extremist frame must be kept in mind. Given the pejorative and marginalizing nature of the term, care should be taken when it is applied and the perspective from which it comes should be acknowledged.[173]

There would be something wrong with an analysis which considered all conservatives extremists; if the fabricated idea that the redacted 2009 DHS memo really was just trying to target conservatives was true, that would be problematic. Likewise, there would also problems with an analysis which considered Trump and his most ardent followers as legitimate political actors, given that Trump tried to steal a free and fair election and his followers attempted to help him do it with violence. I cannot pretend to know where the appropriate line between those two responses is. Stepping back momentarily from the term "extremist," however, can allow a related, but perhaps slightly simpler question to be asked: "how did the "normal" January 6 rioters get to the point where they were willing to use violence in support of a President trying to overthrow a democratic election?" I will argue in the next chapter this question can be answered, in part, using some of the tools of the extremism and radicalisation literature, namely the social identity and social movement perspective.

[171] Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst, "Essentialist Beliefs Social Categories," 123.
[172] Richards, *Extremism, Radicalization and Security*, 218.
[173] Sedgwick, "Radicalization Confusion," 491.

Chapter 3: Radicalisation as identity under threat

The concepts of extremism and radicalisation are deeply connected, yet as with extremism, there is no consensus definition of radicalisation.[174] This is not particularly surprising; if, as Peter Neumann argues, radicalisation is understood roughly to mean "the process whereby people become extremists,"[175] what is meant by "extremist" will in turn alter the meaning of radicalisation. So while there is debate about what radicalisation means, there is some agreement that the term refers to the "how" in the question "how does a person become an extremist?"

What is radicalisation?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the distinction between extreme ideas and extreme actions relates directly to radicalisation, in that the relationship (or lack thereof) between the two will impact how radicalisation occurs. Some authors therefore make a distinction between cognitive radicalisation and behavioural radicalisation, where the former refers to how people adopt extreme ideas, and the latter to how people come to engage in extreme action, political violence and terrorism.[176] Whether cognitive extremism ought to be considered a necessary precursor to behavioural extremism, or in other words, whether cognitive radicalisation is itself part of behavioural radicalisation, is a debated question.[177] Randy Borum, for example, does not see cognitive radicalisation as a necessary precursor to behavioural extremism, arguing that "[m]ost people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists—even those who lay claim to a 'cause'—are not deeply ideological and may not 'radicalize' in any traditional sense."[178] Manni Crone similarly argues

[174] Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, "Fluidity of the Fringes," 3.
[175] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 874.
[176] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle," 961.; Bartlett and Miller, "Edge of Violence," 2.; Crone, "Radicalization Revisited," 590.
[177] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 875-76.; Malthaner, "Radicalization," 386-87.; Kundnani and Hayes, *Globalisation Countering Violent Extremism*, 12.
[178] Borum, "Radicalization Violent Extremism I," 8.

approaches that emphasise extremist ideology provide an overly intellectualist approach to radicalisation that claims a specific relationship between ideas and violence, with the former seen as a precondition for the latter.[179] Donatella della Porta describes these sorts of views as binding radicalisation "to the adoption of extremist beliefs or 'mindsets,' with the assumption, implicit or explicit, that radical beliefs tend to result in violent behavior."[180]

There is some merit to these criticisms. When Ted Kaczynski's "Unabomber manifesto" was published in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* on September 19, 1995,[181] there were surely many regular people who read it and agreed with much of what it said. Yet no imitation Unabomber emerged in the days, weeks, and months after its publication—an outcome that might have been expected if there were some straightforward causal connection between extreme ideas and extreme violence. What these criticisms can miss, however, is that cognitive radicalisation does not have to be solely about beliefs or ideology.[182] Understanding cognitive radicalisation as "what is happening inside people's heads"[183] means broadening its scope beyond the adoption of extreme ideas. In particular for my argument, cognitive radicalisation should be understood as involving changes in social identity and the adoption of perceptual frames that align an individual's understanding of the world and its problems with that of their social group, which they perceive to be under threat. This conception is broadly informed by social identity and social movement theory.[184] So while McCauley and Moskalenko are right to argue "[t]here is no "conveyor belt" from extreme beliefs to extreme action," that does not mean beliefs and ideology are not important—just that they have to be considered within a broader notion of cognitive change, and in the context of frame alignment, a concept from social movement I will come to explain. An individual who has undergone such cognitive radicalisation may be able to be mobilised to certain actions on behalf of the movement, some of which can involve violence.

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[179] Crone, "Radicalization Revisited," 591-93.
[180] della Porta, "Radicalization: A Relational Perspective," 462.
[181] Barnett, "20 Years Later," 60.
[182] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 881-83.
[183] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 3.
[184] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict."; Borum, "Radicalization Violent Extremism I," 16-20.; Malthaner, "Radicalization," 375-76.

While there may be other pathways to political violence or ways of understanding and explaining radicalisation, the advantage of the social movement/social identity perspective in examining the "normals" who stormed the Capitol is that it can account for the hazy and fluid boundaries between mainstream and extreme, and the ways in which individuals might be mobilised to political violence despite not being members of extremist groups. Explaining this perspective is the task I will turn to now.

Social identity and social movements

In the broadest terms, the social identity/social movement perspective argues people can be mobilised to violence when they perceive their group to require defence from an outside threat. Two recent works which centralise the social identity perspective are Marc Sageman's *Turning to Political Violence* and J.M. Berger's *Extremism*.[185] In a sentence, Sageman articulates his framework as follows:

> A political community, in an escalating conflict with an outside group, disillusioned with peaceful means of solving the conflict and outraged by this group's unwarranted aggression, will generate volunteers, who view themselves as soldiers, to defend it against this outside group.[186]

Berger outlines his notion of extremism with similar reference to group dynamics:

> Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group. The hostile action must be part of the in-group's definition of success. Hostile acts can range from verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behavior, violence, and even genocide.[187]

[185] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 4.; Berger, *Extremism*, 24.
[186] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 3.
[187] Berger, *Extremism*, 44.

Central to this framework is the concept of identity, and in particular the value of group identities to individuals. It has long been known that it does not take much for people to show in-group favouritism. Several studies in the early 1970s showed people randomly assigned into arbitrary groups still displayed in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination when tasked with awarding money to other participants.[188] Group identities, however, can be much more than arbitrary. As Anthony Appiah notes, social identities are not just labels that can be applied descriptively; for many people who feel solidarity with their group, their membership has normative significance, and their identities provide them with (and allow them to create) reasons and scripts for how to act, think, and be.[189] In other words, social identities are both descriptive and prescriptive, for both the in-group and the out-group. The prescriptive elements of identity, or the narratives around its meaning, are not developed solely by the in-group—they are created in dialogue with society and other out-groups. "When an identity grouping evolves beyond matters of convenience and simplicity, such as demarcating where you live or go to school," Berger writes, "it requires a narrative to explain the meaning of the collective—what the identity means, where it comes from, and where it is going."[190]

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's theory of inter-group conflict can explain how these identities can lead to hostile behaviour towards out-groups. Social identity, they argue, is made up of "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging."[191] As people desire positive self-esteem, and as their self-esteem relies in part on their social identity, people want their social identity to be positive. Their social identity, however, is dependent on how their social group is evaluated compared with others. In-group members will therefore attempt to positively distinguish their group from the relevant out-groups.[192]

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[188] Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination."; Tajfel et al., "Social Categorization Intergroup Behaviour."
[189] Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*, 8-12.; Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," 160-63.
[190] Berger, *Extremism*, 54.
[191] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 101.
[192] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 101.

The theory is based on a conceptual distinction between interpersonal and intergroup behaviour. They describe a continuum of behaviour: on one end is pure interpersonal behaviour, characterised by a social interaction between two people that occurs purely on the basis on their interpersonal relationship and individual personalities; on the opposite end of the spectrum is pure intergroup behaviour, characterised by a social interaction between two or more individuals or groups that plays out purely through the individuals' group identities and norms, and not on their interpersonal relationships. The authors write that these two extremes of behaviour likely do not exist in reality and that most social interactions exist somewhere between the two, partially influenced by both.[193]

There is another continuum the authors describe which has a causal effect on whether social interactions will operate more like the interpersonal or the intergroup extreme. It again involves two extremes, based on individuals' beliefs about the "the nature and the structure of the relations between social groups in their society.[194] On one end, the "social mobility" mindset believes society is flexible enough to allow movement between groups—for example, by working hard and changing their social class. On the other end, the "social change" mindset does not believe movement is so easy. They see society structured in a stratified and hierarchical way, be it by race, gender, or economic class, and that these group identities are extremely difficult to change. These mindsets may or may not align with objective reality—that is to say, there is not necessarily a "one-to-one relationship" between perceptions of the stratification of society and the facts on the ground, though the authors note there is usually some correlation.[195] Either way, the more individuals lean towards the "social change" end of the continuum, the more they push their social interactions towards the intergroup behavioural dynamic.

Where individuals lie on these two spectrums has consequences for how they treat and see members of the out-group. The closer in-group members are to the "intergroup" and "social change" extremes, the more homogenous their own behaviour towards, and

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[193] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 95.
[194] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 96.
[195] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 96.

perception of, the out-group will be.[196] This behaviour towards to out-group is likely to be hostile if the in-group is privileged or sits atop a hierarchy, and the out-group(s) are perceived to be questioning or threatening that status quo—especially when the privileged group sees their position as legitimate. In this situation, a dominant group will likely react by making their group more positively distinctive.[197]

Empirical research on intergroup conflict is broadly compatible with Tajfel and Turner's theoretical expectations. Federico, Hunt, and Fisher find individuals with a greater need for cognitive closure—the desire for solid conclusions in the face of ambiguity—positively differentiated their in-group to a greater degree when they considered their in-group to have high status. The authors consider this strong differentiation between groups as a precursor of sorts to extremism—it creates the Manichean distinction "between a 'good' us and 'bad' them."[198] Fischer, Haslam, and Smith find that support for aggressive, retaliatory action against a source of threat towards a social group is increased when the salience of that identity is increased. They found that the perception of a given threat was moderated by which identity was more salient—women in the experiment, for example, whose gender identity was made salient felt more threatened (and in response endorsed greater military retaliation) when they were given details of the Taliban and their treatment of women (a threat against gender identity) than they were when shown pictures of the London bombings of 2005 (a threat against national identity).[199] Other research also links threats to social identity with hostility and support for political violence against the out-group.[200] Nichole Argo finds willingness of Palestinians to participate in violent resistance was positively correlated with community-oriented values and negative correlated with self-enhancement values. This, she argues, lends credit to the idea political violence is motivated by social

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[196] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 97.
[197] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory Intergroup Conflict," 105-06.
[198] Federico, Hunt, and Fisher, "Uncertainty and Status-Based Asymmetries," 474.
[199] Fischer, Haslam, and Smith, ""If You Wrong Us"," 147-48.
[200] Obaidi et al., "Living under threat."; Obaidi, Thomsen, and Bergh, "Meta-Cultural Threat Endorsement Violence."

identity concerns, rather than a rational-choice model where people participated for self-interested reasons.[201]

Social identity is only one part of the framework. Social movement theory explains how people can be mobilised to violence on behalf of their group identity. Donatella della Porta describes social movements as ”networks of individuals and organizations that have common identities and conflictual aims and that use unconventional means.”[202] Actors within social movements “are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; share a distinct collective identity.”[203] Social movements aim to change society in their preferred direction, and can emerge both from groups aiming to make society more equitable and groups with privilege who want to preserve or enhance it.[204] For social movements to effect change, however, they need members of the group to mobilise to action. This action is often non-violent, and can involve things like participating in protests, handing out flyers, or contacting government representatives. In the context of extremist movements, however, this action can also extend to violence.

The nature of the action prescribed will be heavily influenced by which political opportunities are open.[205] In social movement theory, the political opportunity structure functions to “enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization, for particular sorts of claims to be advanced rather than others, for particular strategies of influence to be exercised, and for movements to affect mainstream institutional politics and policy.”[206] The principal idea behind the need for political opportunities, notes McVeigh and Estep, is that “people for the most part will not put time and effort into a movement if they believe it’s doomed to fail.”[207] Arie Perliger finds empirical support for this notion with respect to far right violence in the

[201] Argo, "Why Fight?."
[202] della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, 14.
[203] della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 20.
[204] McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 56-57.
[205] della Porta, "Radicalization: A Relational Perspective," 464.
[206] Meyer and Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," 1457-58.
[207] McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 184.

United States, where Republican control of Congress and the presidency was correlated with more attacks by far right perpetrators.[208]

No matter the nature of the action, however, mobilising narratives are required to motivate, and these narratives are known as collective action frames. Collective actions frames are interpretive narratives that provide a certain perspective of the world on behalf of a social identity and its associated movement. They give meaning to events, and play a key role in constructing a group's social reality. Crucially, collective action frames are designed to mobilise people to action by diagnosing a problem and offering a course of action that would resolve it.[209] In effect, collective action frames say to potential movement members "here is how we see the problem and here is our solution." When an individual's way of seeing the world, how it needs to change, and what action is needed to make it so matches up with a social movement's, this is known as frame alignment.[210] Alignment can occur both from a change in the individual's frame and actors within the movement changing and altering their own. Michael Jensen, Anita Atwell Seate, and Patrick James found that cognitive frame alignment and community crisis were the only two factors their analysis considered "'near' necessary causes" of violent extremism.[211] Frames that are particularly effective at mobilising people to action are said to have "resonance"—that is, the view of the world the frame presents makes sense to the individual and they are motivated to take the action it prescribes.[212]

While there can be many different kinds of mobilising collective action frames that might engender political violence, there is one kind in particular I wish to focus on with respect to January 6, and that is those related to collective existential threat. As Berger writes, "[t]he complete destruction of one's in-group is an intoxicating fear and an effective way to mobilize in-group members."[213] In Sageman's model, threats against the group push some

[208] Perliger, *American Zealots*, Chapter 5.
[209] Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes Social Movements," 614-18.
[210] Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes Social Movements," 624.
[211] Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James, "Radicalization to Violence," 1079-80.
[212] Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes Social Movements," 620.
[213] Berger, *Extremism*, 92.

members to develop a “martial identity,” which, for them, “legitimizes political violence: the perpetrators are just soldiers fighting for their imagined communities.”[214] Empirical research supports this intuitive notion. Gilad Hirschberger, Tom Pyszczynski, and Tsachi Ein-Dor find that existential threat motivates support for violent action against an out-group through a sense of retributive justice, rather than a utility-based consideration of violence as an effective solution.[215]

Collective existential threats can be either physical or symbolic; that is, angst can manifest over fears of physical annihilation or genocide and fears that the group identity will in the future no longer exist as it now does, through mechanisms like assimilation or demographic change.[216] Crucially, threats do not have to be realistic or likely to be perceived as such by social groups. While the resonance of a collective action frame depends on its credibility and its salience for the target audience[217]—which on its face should work against frames based on false conspiracies or “alternative facts”—if those conspiracies and falsehoods are accepted by the social group already, then there is reason to expect collective action frames which utilise those aspects of the group’s social reality to be successful.

A criticism of this conceptualisation of mobilisation and radicalisation might be that it doesn’t solve the problem of understanding why some people resort to political violence and others do not. The question has not been answered, just shifted back a step in the analysis; there is still a knowledge gap with respect to why some members of the radicalised population respond to mobilising calls for violence. Presumably, this criticism would allege, there is some difference between the people able to be mobilised and those who are not. The desire for a complete explanation behind this criticism is understandable, but I would contend it is misguided. Such a criticism is coming from the point of view that there must be something special about people who are capable of engaging in violence, that there is

[214] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 40.
[215] Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, and Ein-Dor, "Existential Threat Intergroup Violence."
[216] Hirschberger et al., "Multidimensional Existential Threat Model," 4.
[217] Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes Social Movements," 619-22.

something that distinguishes them from others who share most of their beliefs. Despite its early popularity, the idea that psychopathology is a primary contributor to violent extremism or terrorism is not supported by the evidence and has fallen out of favour.[218] No "terrorist psychological profile" has been found and those who engage in political violence are not "crazy."[219] Psychological factors that have been linked with extremism—for example, the need for significance and meaning;[220] a perception of unfairness;[221] or feelings of uncertainty[222]—are not unique to extremists or terrorists, and explanations of radicalisation therefore cannot rely solely on any individual cognitive deficit or quirk.[223] Instead, both intra and inter group dynamics are more likely to yield insight into who engages in violence and who does not.[224] Arun Kundnani argues micro-level explanations are in fact impossible:

> While policing agencies search for scholarship that can give them a magical formula to predict who will be a future terrorist, an honest survey of individual cases suggests that the micro-level question of what causes one person rather than another in the same political context to engage in violence is beyond analysis and best seen as unpredictable.[225]

On the other hand, Kundnani does consider analysis at the meso and macro levels to be fruitful.[226] In other words, we may be able to say what makes one social movement, or groups within a movement, more likely to engage in political violence, but not all that much about which individual members within those movements or groups will do so. Likewise, Sageman argues there is no evidence that those who adopt a "martial identity" are any different from other members of the social movement they are a part of.[227] In short, there is

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[218] Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism," 161.; Jackson, "Knowledge, Power and Politics," 72.
[219] Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways," 84.; Doosje et al., "Terrorism, Radicalization, and De-radicalization," 79.
[220] Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski, "Quest for Significance."; Kruglanski et al., "Psychology of Radicalization."
[221] van den Bos, "Unfairness and Radicalization."
[222] Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory."
[223] Ozer, Obaidi, and Pfattheicher, "Group Membership and Radicalization," 1231.
[224] Ginges et al., "Psychology Out of Laboratory," 517.
[225] Kundnani, "Radicalisation: Journey of Concept," 21.
[226] Kundnani, "Radicalisation: Journey of Concept," 21-22.
[227] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 38.

currently no theoretical or empirical way of determining which individuals within a movement will turn to violence and which will not.[228] This, however, is consistent with the theoretical framework I am adopting. The social movement and social identity perspectives from which I am drawing do not treat violence as "a sui generis phenomenon or as one attributable to a distinct class of people."[229] It instead aims to place violence in context in a field of actors, as one possible course of action among many, and as such does not consider necessarily consider the people who engage in violence on behalf of social movements to possess any special distinguishing traits from others in the movement. The value of social movement perspective for studying political violence and terrorism, argues Jereon Gunning, is that it can "relocate violence within its social context and encourage investigation into the interactions between militant organisations, the larger social movement of which they form a part, and the society and political system more broadly."[230] The value of this perspective with respect January 6 is that it is therefore not committed to the idea that there is something intrinsically different about those who entered the Capitol violently, those who just attended the rally, those who may have watched at home in support, or those who voted for Trump but did not support the events of that day. Instead of having to say "these people are extremists" and outline rigid criteria, they can all be examined as actors in a broader movement.

It is important to emphasise that on this model, political violence does not occur without mobilising actors making the case for action to be taken. This is what Jacquelien van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans refer to as the "demand and supply" metaphor of mobilisation, where "the supply side of politics refers to social movement organizations, political parties, political entrepreneurs, and media in a society" and "[t]he demand side of politics refers to the potential of citizens in a society susceptible to appeals for political action."[231] Thus, just as critics of overly intellectualised concepts of cognitive radicalisation argue there is no straightforward causal link between extreme ideas and extreme violence,

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[228] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 22.; Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle," 959.
[229] Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner, "Contentious Politics Approach Radicalization," 3.
[230] Gunning, "Social Movement Study Terrorism," 161.
[231] van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, "Radicalization," 189-91.

violence is not the inevitable result when a social group perceives itself to be threatened. Violence only occurs when supply and demand are brought together in mobilisation.

How, then, do the "normals" who stormed the Capitol on January 6 fit into this framework? My claim is that the rioters saw themselves as part of a threatened social group, and that they were mobilised to protect it by political actors, chief among them the former president, Donald Trump. In many ways, these people are driven by similar forces to those which Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto argue drove support for the Tea Party : "the anxiety they feel as they perceive the America they know, the country they love, slipping away, threatened by the rapidly changing face of what they believe is the 'real' America: a heterosexual, Christian, middle-class, (mostly) male, white country."[232] In a more recent paper Parker argues Trump's "use of Anglo cultural appeals is very similar to, and often even more overt than, the Tea Party's use of them."[233] The sense of threat, however, goes further than a discomfort with the changing face of America; many of the rioters believe this change is intentionally designed and orchestrated to replace them within the American electorate, or perhaps even destroy them, physically or symbolically, as a social group.[234] These fears are broadly in line with conspiracy theories of "the great replacement" or "white genocide," and until recently were mostly confined to the extreme fringes of political discourse.[235] Replacement theory centres around the idea that "white European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through migration and the growth of minority communities."[236] The threat to 'real Americans' is perceived both symbolically (angst over the white, Christian population no longer being the dominant group) and physically (angst over white population decline or "genocide"). Rioters do not trust Democrats or the mainstream media, both of whom they see as complicit in trying to replace them as Americans. The right-wing media environment they exist in reinforces these ideas,

[232] Parker and Barreto, *Change Can't Believe In*, 3.
[233] Parker, "Status Threat," 56.
[234] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 27-28.
[235] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 53.
[236] Davey and Ebner, *The 'Great Replacement'*, 7.

and indulges in their conspiratorial worldview. The social reality they share with others in the movement is open to conspiracy theories and "alternative facts," in so far as that way of thinking works to the in-group's favour. Trump was viewed as a defender of white Christian interests,[237] and his loss in the 2020 election would therefore have put these interests at risk. The former President's claim that the election was stolen from him (and by extension white, Christian America) was met with positive reception. His efforts to overturn the election results in the final months of his presidency proved unsuccessful. January 6 therefore became something of a last-ditch effort to keep a grip on the highest office in the land. If the certification of the ballots in the Senate could be stopped, then there was potentially (so Trump and his team believed) still time to stop the inevitable. This was understood by those in the movement, and on the morning of January 6, when Trump told them if they did not "fight like hell" they would "not have a country anymore,"[238] they knew what they had to try and do. This collective action frame, or what Berger calls the "crisis-solution construct,"[239] mobilised many people who had no prior connections to extremist groups or histories of violence to take extreme actions in defence of their embattled community. As far as political opportunities go, being mobilised to action by the President of the United States is perhaps as open as an opportunity could ever be. Many rioters believed Trump would pardon them (and in January of 2022, he said he would consider doing so if he became President again).[240]

While it is true there were different groups present on January 6, each with somewhat distinct ideologies, the fact they could all be mobilised to the same cause suggests at some level there is a through line that ties these groups together. My contention is that the sense of threat to the aforementioned identity—that of a 'real American'—can encircle at least parts of all the different groups present, and can provide an intelligible frame for understanding how those who were not part of small formal extremist groups (where the social dynamics may be

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[237] Smith and King, "White Protectionism in America."; Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich, "Threat of Increasing Diversity."; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, "Make America Christian Again."
[238] Naylor, "Trump's Jan. 6 Speech."
[239] Berger, *Extremism*, 122-23.
[240] Bleiberg and Mustian, "Capitol Rioters Trump Pardon."; Colvin, "Trump Dangles Pardons."

expected to produce greater violence)[241] were nonetheless mobilised to violence. As della Porta points out, the collective identity of a social movement is often not expressed through "integrated and homogeneous identities," but are formed instead through a "polycentric rather than a hierarchical structure" of constituent identities.[242] In other words, we should not expect one rigid identity to be the centre of this movement. Indeed, as Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss point out, "fragmentation and schism have been the norm rather than the exception" among far-right groups, and most attempts to unify them, such as at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, have failed.[243] January 6, they argue, was "the first mass action of an eclectic but increasingly unified extreme far-right scene."[244]

Another benefit to this framework is that it allows those who participated in January 6 to be placed in context with other members of broader identity and movement who did not storm the Capitol that day. After all, as with there always being many more people who have extremist ideas than there are people who engage in extremist violence, there are many more people in the United States population who will fit into this identity construct than who rose to violence to defend it. Research from CPOST suggests there are 21 million Americans who believe the 2020 election was stolen, that Biden is an illegitimate president, and that violence would be justified to restore Trump to the presidency.[245] Of these people, nearly half believe in the great replacement and the QAnon conspiracy theory, which is nearly 400% higher than rates of belief in the general population.[246]

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to examining this social identity and how it developed to see itself as threatened.

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[241] Ginges et al., "Psychology Out of Laboratory," 517.
[242] della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 98.
[243] Hughes and Miller-Idriss, "Uniting for Total Collapse," 12.
[244] Hughes and Miller-Idriss, "Uniting for Total Collapse," 12.
[245] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 18.
[246] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 28.

An American identity under threat

The norms that define American identity are usually categorised into one of two kinds: civic norms or ascriptive norms. Civic norms are those ideological elements of American identity that can be shared by anyone who adopts them, such as “the liberal creedal tradition of individualism, minimal government intervention into private life, hard work, equal opportunity, and political freedom,” but also civic republicanism, where citizens have a civic duty to be informed, engaged in politics, and think in terms of the greater good of all.[247] Ascriptive elements, on the other hand, are exclusive, and police the boundaries of American identity on characteristics like race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.[248] Civic and ascriptive elements are not mutually exclusive and both are present in conceptions of American identity to this day.[249] It is an American identity based on a combination of these ascriptive norms—being white and Christian—that I argue constitutes the ‘real Americans’ who feel threatened by changing the demographics of America and the prospect they will no longer be prototypical Americans.

Research has demonstrated the importance of these ascriptive notions of American identity for Trump’s base; the desire to keep America white, both demographically and culturally, has been correlated with support for Trump, as has the desire to maintain Christianity’s dominance in America.[250] Trump’s “galvanizing story of America” aimed to protect white, Christian Americans from losing in the zero-sum game of modern America.[251] Data about electoral support for Trump has its limits for my purposes, however, as it includes in its samples many people who voted for Trump yet nonetheless will have disapproved of the Capitol riots.

Looking at those who participated in the events of January 6, however, suggests these ascriptive elements may be even more important for them. Analysis from CPOST of the 716

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[247] Schildkraut, "American Identity," 447.
[248] Schildkraut, "American Identity," 447-48.
[249] Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 38-39.; Lepore, *This America*, 57-58.
[250] Graham et al., "Who Wears MAGA Hat?."; Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich, "Threat of Increasing Diversity."; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, "Make America Christian Again."
[251] Smith and King, "White Protectionism in America," 471.

people arrested for their involvement in January 6 (as at January 1 2022), shows 93% of them are white, which is greater than both the percentage of the general population who is white (69%) and the percentage of 2020 Trump voters who are white (85%).[252] Though there is no similar data on the rioters' religious affiliations, there was an overwhelming presence on the day of Christian symbology and rhetoric.[253] The fact the rioters were not 100% white does not necessarily count against my interpretation of their motives—after all, CPOST found only half of those with insurrectionist sentiment believed in the great replacement, and even once factors such as belief in QAnon, media consumption habits, partisanship, racial resentment, importance of whiteness to identity, and evangelism (among many others) were added to their model, it still only explained 64% of the variance in insurrectionist sentiment.[254] In other words, I do not claim the identity-based explanation of 'real Americans' is the entirety of the explanation, just that it is a very significant one.

Several events in modern history contributed to the sense of threat at the centre of 'real American's' concerns. The Al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001, and the ensuing response from the Bush administration signalled to many Americans that their security in the world was no longer (if in fact it ever was) guaranteed. For some, it sharpened the different between "us," the freedom loving, secular, and democratic "West," and "them," the totalitarian, freedom-hating, and radically religious "them." The nature of the threat was existential and in some minds 9/11 was the first shot in a war between two incompatible ways of life.[255]

The election of Obama was also a significant event for those who feared a changing America.[256] Obama himself writes "[i]t was as if my very presence in the White House had triggered a deep-seated panic, a sense that the natural order had been disrupted."[257] The

[252] CPOST, *American Face of Insurrection*, 5.
[253] Boorstein, "Capitol Attack Christian Revolt."; Edsall, "Capitol Insurrection Christian Nationalist."; Armaly, Buckley, and Enders, "Christian Nationalism Political Violence," 2.
[254] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 28-29.
[255] Miller-Idriss, "From 9/11 to 1/6," 61.
[256] Parker and Barreto, *Change Can't Believe In*, 191.
[257] Obama, *A Promised Land*, 672.

result, as Nicole Yadon and Spencer Piston explain, was that "Obama's rise to the presidency resulted not in the decline of prejudice but in its activation."[258] The Tea Party movement, born near the beginning of Obama's first term, was significantly motivated by racial resentment,[259] despite much protestation from members and sympathisers that racism had nothing to do with it.[260]

The most significant driver of threat perceptions, however, is not a single event but rather the long-noted trend of the changing demographics of America. This potential for this to contribute to the growth of a nativist and exclusivist conception of America was identified by Samuel Huntington in his 2004 book *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. In it, he hypothesizes that "the profound demographic changes occurring in America" could generate a reaction of "white nativism." For these people, "to keep America America, it is necessary keep America white."[261] The nature of those demographic changes, and whites' reaction to them, are examined next.

Whiteness

The majority-minority thesis predicts that sometime in the middle of this century, in line with current trends and thanks to immigration and the aging of white population, the share of the American population that is white will fall below 50 percent.[262] At that point, society will become majority-minority—that is, the majority of the population will be minorities, or non-white.[263] For many whites, the thought of this causes significant anxiety, and "congeals into a threatening vision about their place in America."[264] CPOST's analysis suggest the 'real Americans' who were arrested for their role in January 6 acutely felt this change as a threat. Analysing the counties from which the arrested insurrectionists came from shows the more

[258] Yadon and Piston, "Whites' Anti-Black Obama's Presidency."
[259] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 230.
[260] Parker and Barreto, *Change Can't Believe In*, 9.
[261] Huntington, *Who Are We?*, 310-12.
[262] Alba, *Great Demographic Illusion*, 1.
[263] Craig, Rucker, and Richeson, "Racial and Political Dynamics," 205.
[264] Myers and Levy, "Racial Population Projections."; Alba, *Great Demographic Illusion*, 2.

the white population in a county declined since 2015, the more likely that county was to have sent people to the capitol on January 6.[265] For those who believe in the great replacement this population change is intentional, and they "argue that white European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through migration and the growth of minority communities."[266] Those charged as responsible for this purported replacement include progressive politicians, the media, globalists, and Jews.[267]

It is important to note that the perception of threat is what is relevant for the discussion that follows.[268] As Samuel Huntington points out, it is only the perception of white loss, rather than any objective or material loss in reality, that is needed to generate hostility against the out-group.[269] To say some whites feel threatened by the increasing diversity of America is not to endorse their interpretation of a changing America as necessarily threatening; many Americans do not find it threatening at all. Further to that point, Richard Alba argues the majority-minority thesis is analytically flawed to begin with, because it is based on census data that codes most mixed-race people as non-white, despite the more complex social reality where many mixed-race people are just as integrated into white communities as they are minority communities.[270] This exaggerates the degree to which "white America" is changing. The subsequent framing of inevitable white decline therefore needlessly feeds into a narrative of an intensifying zero-sum game for influence and power between racial groups, which whites are projected to lose if something does not change.[271] Data from the 2020 census aligns with his thesis, as it shows the change in white population, both in absolute numbers and proportionally, depends on how "white" is defined.[272] That is not to deny the demographics of America are changing—they are—just that the story is not as straightforward as some interpretations of the demographic data would suggest.

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[265] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 12.
[266] Davey and Ebner, *The 'Great Replacement'*, 7.
[267] Davey and Ebner, *The 'Great Replacement'*, 12.
[268] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 140.
[269] Huntington, *Who Are We?*, 314.
[270] Alba, *Great Demographic Illusion*.
[271] Alba, *Great Demographic Illusion*, 2-8.
[272] Wang, "White Population Actually Changing."

The importance of narratives on the perception of threat has been demonstrated in research.[273] Hui Bai and Christopher Federico found evidence that whites' perception of absolute non-Hispanic white population decline (in contrast with relative decline) increased feelings of existential threat—the fear that the group will no longer physically exist—which led to greater inter-group bias and conservative politics.[274] Further studies from the authors also link this collective existential threat, driven by the perception of non-Hispanic white population decline, to support for extreme-right groups and actions.[275] However, the authors argue the fact they found no evidence of a direct link between white population decline and right-wing extremism means the latter is not an inevitable reaction given the former; avoiding framings that "imply conscious, conspiratorial, or aggressive efforts to change the composition of the population" may lower the perception of threat, which in turn can lower the support for right-wing extremism.[276]

There is also research suggesting the perception of threat from demographic change changes not only with interpretive narratives but also with time. Kinder and Kam found in their analysis of data from 1992 that the relationship between ethnocentrism and opposition to immigration was stronger in places that had greater growth in the foreign-born population from 1980 to 1990, suggesting the rate of increase in the immigrant population is more important than their absolute numbers.[277] Kauffman found similar results in the UK, where rapid increases in immigrant populations were associated with opposition to immigration in whites, but high levels of established immigrants reduced opposition to immigration—a finding Kaufmann attributes to the contact hypothesis,[278] the idea that attitudes towards out-groups becomes more positive over time as contact and interaction with them increases.[279] This comports with other data showing the places where immigrant

[273] Myers and Levy, "Racial Population Projections."; Craig, Rucker, and Richeson, "Racial and Political Dynamics," 211.
[274] Bai and Federico, "Collective Existential Threat ".
[275] Bai and Federico, "White Demographic Shifts."
[276] Bai and Federico, "White Demographic Shifts," 14.
[277] Kinder and Kam, *Us Against Them*, 147-49.
[278] Kaufmann, "Levels or Changes?."
[279] Alba and Foner, "Immigration Geography of Polarization," 239.

populations are highest are also usually the places where native-majority sentiment towards them is most positive.[280] Greater ethnic diversity within a country has also been linked with lower numbers of hate groups in that county.[281]

There are two conceptual lenses related to whites' racial attitudes through which this perception of threat can be understood: white identity and racial resentment. In the context of whiteness, these correspond to in-group attitudes and out-group attitudes, respectively. Ashley Jardina argues positive in-group feelings and negative out-group feelings are not two sides of the same coin—they are related but also somewhat independent from one another.[282] Thus, a person identifying as white (someone who says their racial identity as a white person is important to them) does not necessarily do so because they have negative attitudes to everyone who is non-white; their "in-group love" can be motivated more from a "desire to protect group members' status and privilege," rather than just dislike or animus towards the out-group.[283] While she does find some correlations between her measures of white identity and racial resentment, anti-black stereotypes, negative evaluations of other minorities, and positive affect towards the KKK, the effects are all modest enough that she argues that white identity is not simply an alternative way of describing these other negative out-group feelings.[284]

As the dominant racial group in the United States for most of its history, white racial identity has often not been salient for white Americans. Whites have been seen as the 'prototype' or 'default' American and their racial identity has therefore been taken for granted.[285] Yet in the face of threats to their status—the prospect of a majority-minority country, and the election of Obama among them—Jardina argues white identity has become more salient for many Americans.[286] "When these cherished privileges—ones that whites

[280] Alba and Foner, "Immigration Geography of Polarization," 239.
[281] Goetz, Rupasingha, and Loveridge, "Social Capital, Religion, Wal-Mart," 390.
[282] Jardina, "In-Group Love Out-Group Hate," 5-6.
[283] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 78.
[284] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 78-81.
[285] Devos and Banaji, "American = White?," 464.
[286] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 37-43.

have to come to accept as almost natural—are challenged," she writes, "many whites react defensively, condemning and resisting changes to the racial status quo."[287] Threats that go beyond status also have in impact on the salience and importance of in-group identity. Wohl, Branscombe, and Reysen examined the effects collective existential threat (also known as extinction threat) on in-group feelings, and found it caused angst about the in-group's future, which led to increased support for behaviours that strengthened the in-group, such as wanting to send their child to in-group schools, wanting to marry someone from the same in-group, and insulating their in-group traditions from other cultures'.[288] White identity has also been linked with positive affect for far right groups, supportive attitudes toward extreme policies (for example, the Muslim ban and border separation of children), and extreme behavioural intentions towards undocumented immigrants.[289]

White identity may be part of the importance of whiteness, but it is not the whole story—out-group attitudes of whites are just as important. CPOST's survey suggests racial resentment is a more significant driver of belief in the great replacement among those with insurrectionist sentiment than is "the importance of Whiteness to identity."[290] This is the reason why framing the "normals" as purely a phenomenon of white identity politics is too narrow a frame for understanding their motivations. Whiteness is central, to be sure, but not always because being white is explicitly important to individual's identities. Negative feelings towards out-groups, or racial resentment, can have semi-independent and just as important effects.[291] Jardina, for instance, finds racial out-group attitudes and American identity, alongside white identity, are roughly coequal with each other in explaining more exclusionary opinions on what it means to be a "true" American.[292]

Among other things, the understanding 'true' or 'real' Americans have of what racism is at least part of why they see the changing demographics of America—which is objectively

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[287] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 22.
[288] Wohl, Branscombe, and Reysen, "Perceiving Group's Future Jeopardy."
[289] Bai, "Whites' Racial Identity Centrality."
[290] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 30.
[291] Jardina, "In-Group Love Out-Group Hate."
[292] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*.

occurring—as happening intentionally. Many whites believe they face more racial discrimination than other racial groups.[293] This perception has grown among whites in tandem with decreasing perceptions of anti-black racism.[294] This, I contend, comes in part from their understanding of what racism is. Many on the right frequently point to the line in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech—where he expresses his desire that one day American society will judge his children by the content of their character, not the colour of their skin—as informing their understanding of what racism is[295] To be racist, in their mind, is to judge someone by their skin colour. There are two ways, however, in which the word racist is used in modern society. One refers to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that might be thought of as classic racism. An example of this is Eatwell and Goodwin's definition of racism as "the erroneous and dangerous belief that the world is divided into hierarchically ordered races."[296] The other says racism is anything that contributes intentionally or not to racial inequality, perhaps most popularly forward by Ibram X. Kendi in his bestselling *How to Be an Antiracist*. Kendi argues "racism" needs to return to its "proper usage," which is as a descriptive term that identifies structural racial inequalities, or, in his words, "[r]acism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities."[297] Racist policies, as Kendi defines them, are policies that sustain inequities. He gives the example of differing rates of home ownership between different racial groups. To say this inequality is racist is only to say that there exists an inequality between the two on the basis of race and that "written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines" have created it—it is not necessarily to say this inequality exists on the basis of discrimination from racist (in the first sense) attitudes.[298] Racist ideas are those which attribute racial inequalities to something inherent in the racial groups themselves, rather than the structural conditions, or in Kendi's parlance, racist policies.[299] On Kendi's definition

[293] Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 144-46.
[294] Norton and Sommers, "Whites See Racism Zero-Sum."
[295] Sokol, *The Heavens Might Crack*, 260.
[296] Eatwell and Goodwin, *National Populism*, 74-75.
[297] Kendi, *How to Be Antiracist*, 17-18.
[298] Kendi, *How to Be Antiracist*, 17-20.
[299] Kendi, *How to Be Antiracist*, 20.

of racism, racial discrimination is not necessarily racist—it depends on whether that discrimination creates equity or inequity.[300]

Those who understand racism only in the first sense see all discrimination as racist—even those designed to redress racial inequalities. This "colour-blind" approach can therefore function to preserve the racial inequalities and the privileges of whites in society, even without whites being explicitly racist in the first sense of the word.[301] Proponents of this view typically see racial inequalities as somehow the fault of the racial groups themselves—a notion that has been linked with support for Trump.[302] Because they perceive anti-white racism to be rampant, calls to dismantle white supremacy—in this context meaning "broad systems of inequality that insure racial disparity of health, income, life, and freedom"[303]—are taken to be anti-white rather than pro-equity.[304]

The line between this understanding of racism, perceptions of anti-white discrimination, and existential threat can be seen clearly in the rhetoric of those of the "alt-right." For example, Gregory Hood writes in his contribution to *A Fair Hearing: The Alt-Right in the Words of its Members and Leaders*, that "ordinary white people, even those who revere Martin Luther King Jr., are often surprised or outraged to find themselves referred to as racists or 'Nazis.'"[305] People who ostensibly revere King—or at least colour-blind caricature of him[306]—cannot be racist in Hood's view, and those who lodge such accusations must therefore do so in service of a bad faith effort to paint whites as evil. "Deconstructing a group's identity as entirely negative" he writes, "is a precursor to politically, economically, and physically destroying that group."[307]

Related views about the great replacement have been heard in mainstream circles for some time. Perhaps most notably was Ann Coulter's 2015 bestselling book, *Adios America,* in

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[300] Kendi, *How to Be Antiracist*, 19.
[301] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*.; DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post, "White Views Civil Rights."
[302] Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, 169-72.
[303] Belew et al., "Thoughts Associated Press Stylebook " xi-xii.
[304] Kendi, "Mantra of White Supremacy."
[305] Hood, "The New Kulaks," 9.
[306] Berry, "Vindicating King," 143.
[307] Hood, "The New Kulaks," 9.

which she espouses an explicitly ethnonationalist conception of America, and advances narratives of existential threat from immigration:

> The American electorate isn't moving to the left—it's shrinking. Democrats figured out they'd never win with Americans, so they implemented an evil, genius plan to change this country by restocking it with voters more favorably disposed to left-wing policies than Americans ever would be.[308]

Such ideas have not just been floated in public discourse, never to be heard again. According to CPOST's survey data of those who believe both that the use of force is justified to return Trump to the White House and that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president because the 2020 election was stolen, 54 percent also said they believe in the narrative outlined by Coulter above.[309] This is another example of the increasing overlap between the mainstream and extreme, and the difficulty in finding clear borders between, as I argued exists in chapter one. Coulter's and 'real Americans' politics share a lot with people like Hood. The social identity and social movement perspective, however, can consider them both as connected and part of a greater whole, without necessarily needing to declare whether Coulter is or is not an extremist (though there is certainly an argument she should be).

Christian Nationalism

A leading scholar of Christian nationalism, Samuel Perry, told the New York Times that "[t]he Capitol insurrection was as Christian nationalist as it gets."[310] Perry and his co-author Andrew Whitehead define Christian nationalism as "a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life."[311] The concept is therefore broader than just

[308] Coulter, *Adios, America*, 19.
[309] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 28.
[310] Edsall, "Capitol Insurrection Christian Nationalist."
[311] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back God*, 10.

evangelicalism and "it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious."[312] For 'real Americans,' whiteness and Christianity are inextricably tied together.[313]

Christian nationalism has been linked with support for Trump. Research from Baker, Perry, and Whitehead examining Trump support in the 2020 election found Christian Nationalism still had independent explanatory value as previous research on Trump support in 2016 showed,[314] but in 2020 it was more strongly mediated through concerns about immigrants and Muslims. This shows that Christian Nationalism, the authors explain, is "strongly tethered to antipathy toward people perceived as ethnoracial outsiders," and though some methodological changes since their prior research may account for the stronger relationship between the two, they also hypothesize it could also "be due to an increasing cultural and ideological affinity between Christian nationalism and xenophobia in the Trump era."[315]

This interactive effect of Christian nationalism with other factors was also found in research looking at Christian nationalism's relationship to support for January 6 and political violence in general. Miles Armaly, David Buckley, and Adam Enders found that although Christian nationalism was correlated with seeing the events of January 6 as legitimate, this effect was mediated by white identity, a sense of victimhood, and conspiratorial information.[316] Other research has found the interaction of whiteness and Christian nationalism to be correlated with the denial of racial injustice against blacks and a greater perception of anti-white discrimination.[317]

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[312] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back God*, 10.
[313] Perry et al., "Divided by Faith," 2.
[314] Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, "Make America Christian Again."
[315] Baker, Perry, and Whitehead, "Keep America Christian," 288-89.
[316] Armaly, Buckley, and Enders, "Christian Nationalism Political Violence."
[317] Perry et al., "Divided by Faith."

Polarisation

For some Americans, the Democratic Party is at the centre of both the great replacement and QAnon conspiracy theories.[318] To understand how some Americans came to see them as a hostile, evil, and perhaps even subhuman opposition that hates America, we need to examine political polarisation.

The term polarisation, however, is somewhat misleading; it implies two poles moving away from each other in symmetrical fashion. Yet as Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue, "[f]ar too many discussions of polarization are based on a flawed [diagnosis]: that polarization is broadly similar in degree and kind at both ends of the political spectrum."[319] This diagnosis is flawed, they argue, because polarisation is mostly a result of Republicans moving dramatically rightward—a view shared by many others.[320] For this reason, the term asymmetric polarisation is a more accurate way of describing the phenomenon.

Asymmetric polarisation in Congress has been increasing ever since the 1970s.[321] The United States' two main political parties both used to be big ideological tents, housing both conservatives and liberals, but this began to change in the 1960s. While the 1964 Republican presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, lost the national election, he won four southern states—including Georgia for the first time in history.[322] Prior to this, the south had been solid Democratic territory. But the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 began the split between conservative southern Democrats or "Dixiecrats" and the Democratic Party. Though the Democrats held the majority in the Senate, and the legislation was the policy of the Democratic Administration and president Lyndon Johnson, it was the Dixiecrat faction of

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[318] Coulter, *Adios, America*, 19.; NCRI. and PERIL., *The QAnon Conspiracy*, 8.; Kydd, "Decline, Radicalization Attack Capitol," 14.
[319] Hacker and Pierson, "Confronting Asymmetric Polarization," 59.
[320] Hacker and Pierson, "Confronting Asymmetric Polarization," 59.; Zimmer, "Writing (Pre-)History "Polarized" Present," 405-06.; Mann and Ornstein, *Even Worse Than Looks*, XXIV.; Barber and McCarty, "Causes Consequences Polarization," 17-18.; Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 228-29.; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 223.; Hare and Poole, "Polarization Contemporary American Politics," 417.; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, "Beyond Misinformation," 358.
[321] Barber and McCarty, "Causes Consequences Polarization," 17.
[322] Mann and Ornstein, *Even Worse Than Looks*, 47.

the Democratic party who filibustered the bill. The legislation was eventually passed with support from vast majorities of Republicans in the House and Senate, but at the cost, for the Democrats, of their alliance with white southern conservatives.[323]

Where Goldwater's appeal was limited to the more extreme members of the south desiring to protect their status and the racial hierarchy, the eventual winner of the 1968 election, Richard Nixon, pursued a decidedly more moderate strategy, utilising coded language to avoid the negative trappings of openly racist language while successfully signalling to southern whites he would look out for their interests.[324]

In the years since, the Democratic party has been forced to become a coalition party that appealed to many different groups in order to win elections, whereas the Republican party has been able to instead speak directly to its base—conservative, Christian whites.[325] This is not to say that it is only the shift of those southern conservatives that explains the increasing extremity of the Republican party. As Barber and McCarthy point out, all conservatives in the Republican party, not just those from southern districts, have followed the trajectory of increasing conservativism.[326] One of the most dramatic rightward shifts in recent decades was the Tea Party movement. The movement's supporters, leaders, and politicians labelled as RINOs—Republican in name only—those in the Republican Party who did not share their vision for pushing the party further to the right.[327]

Demographic realignment was not the only factor purported to have intensified asymmetric polarisation. Increasing numbers of safely partisan districts, as Hacker and Pierson argue, mean many elections (especially for Republicans) are in practice intra-party competitions. Without the need to think about an eventual tack to the centre in the general election, the risk in these races is that another challenger can always run to your right, so the

[323] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 28-30.
[324] Maxwell and Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy*, 5-6.
[325] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 230-33.
[326] Barber and McCarty, "Causes Consequences Polarization," 27.
[327] Mulloy, *Enemies of the State*, 160.

incentive is to play to the base.[328] The result is congressional representatives tend to be more ideologically extreme than they otherwise would be in a more competitive district.

The polarisation discussed so far refers to ideological polarisation of representatives in congress and other party elites. While evidence supports the idea that partisan sorting has occurred—in other words, liberals are much more likely to be Democrats and conservatives more likely to be Republicans—it does not appear to support the idea that the American public have gone to the extremes in their policy preferences.[329] Even so, the bases of both parties tend to dislike and distrust each other much more than they once did—a phenomenon known as affective polarisation.[330] Some authors argue this is because polarisation among the population is better interpreted as a phenomenon of identity than it is ideology, pointing to evidence showing weak association between policy preferences and partisan affect.[331]

There is some evidence, however, that perceptions of the differences between members of the parties are greater than they are in reality. Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood argue partisanship is theorised to result from the social groups that are associated with the parties, and that when people think about parties, they do so with a prototype in mind. Thinking about a Republican, for example, might bring to mind a white, rich, southern, or evangelical character, or a Democrat as non-white, working-class, or gay. The tendency to see these prototypes as representative of the group, however, means people will overestimate the prevalence of those stereotypical groups within the parties.[332] Their data showed this to be true for both people judging their own party and judging the other party, though in the latter they were further off-base. They also found the degree of misperception was correlated with interest in political news.[333] The consequences of this misperception are that those who were most wrong about the makeup of the other party—judging the percentage of Democrats who

[328] Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, 123.
[329] Barber and McCarty, "Causes Consequences Polarization," 21-25.
[330] Iyengar et al., "Origins Consequences Affective Polarisation," 130.
[331] Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 421-24.
[332] Ahler and Sood, "Parties in Our Heads," 965.
[333] Ahler and Sood, "Parties in Our Heads," 966-69.

are black, atheists, or union members, for example—judged the parties to be more ideologically sorted, and thus feel more socially distant from them.[334] Other research shows Democrats and Republican also overestimate how much the other party distrusts and dehumanises them, enhancing each sides' desire for social distance from members of the other party.[335] Erin Cassese finds partisans who dehumanise the other side also tend to desire greater social distance from them, as well as see them as more morally distant.[336] The desire for greater social distance is often followed through on. Ross Butters and Christopher Hare find evidence that Americans' mostly discuss politics only with other people who agree with them, and they hypothesise these networks have become increasingly homogenous in recent decades.[337] Both Democrats and Republicans increasingly say they would not want their children to marry a member of the opposition party,[338] though some data suggests greater proportions of Republicans have this concern.[339] Even if the reality is that polarisation is not as extreme as Americans believe it to be, their perception of it is much more closely correlated with how they act and feel towards members of the other side.[340] This hostility has grown so much that it has led to negative partisanship—a phenomenon where "large proportions of Democrats and Republicans now dislike the opposing party and its leaders more than they like their own party and its leaders."[341]

How polarisation relates to the "real American" identity at the centre of my explanation of the "normals" who participated in January 6 is complex. Given the rioters were Trump supporters, and Trump is a Republican, it is true to say on some level they were Republicans too. But Trump's base is not identical to the broader Republican base. McVeigh and Estep point out that while support for Trump in the general election of 2016 is strongly correlated

[334] Ahler and Sood, "Parties in Our Heads," 973.
[335] Moore-Berg et al., "Exaggerated Meta-perceptions ".
[336] Cassese, "Partisan Dehumanization American Politics."
[337] Butters and Hare, "Polarized Networks?."
[338] Vavreck, "Measure of Identity."
[339] Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 417-18.
[340] Enders and Armaly, "Effects Actual Perceived Polarization."
[341] Abramowitz and McCoy, "Negative Partisanship Trump's America," 146.

with support for Mitt Romney in the 2012 election—showing that Republican partisans got behind Trump in the general—the correlation between Trump's 2016 primary vote share and his 2016 general election vote share is practically non-existent.[342] However, support for Trump in a national election is likely to be most strongly explained by partisanship, given that the choice for president is a binary decision, and negative partisanship is strong, and this is what many studies find.[343] Partisanship, however, is not the entirety of the explanation, with many other studies pointing to factors such as racial resentment, xenophobia, support for white nationalism and/or Christian nationalism, as having significant predictive value.[344]

Some argue Trump's base of support is unique among Republicans in the degree to which it is animated by out-group animus. Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John Kane agree with Ahler and Sood that evaluations of the parties are determined in part by individuals' feelings towards party-aligned groups, and that positive in-group and negative out-group feelings can therefore contribute to support for political candidates and parties. They find that animus towards Democratically-aligned groups, such as African-Americans, Hispanics, Muslims, Gays and Lesbians, predicted support for Trump in the 2016 election, but did not predict support for other Republicans.[345] Interestingly, their measure of animus was taken from 2011, supporting the idea that Trump did not create his movement through his rhetoric but instead managed to capture a pre-existing constituency.[346] This is suggestive, then, of Trump's most ardent supporters seeing themselves defined less by themselves as Republicans and more as anti-Democrats and the groups they represent.

When we look to those who support the events of January 6, we see partisanship explains relatively little, at least directly. CPOST's survey data shows partisanship is far from the most important factor in explaining what they call "insurrectionist sentiment," where belief in the great replacement alone accounts for 48% of the variance. Adding Qanon gets to 56%, and

[342] McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 121.
[343] Mutz, "Status Threat Not Hardship," E4333.; Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 235-45.
[344] Graham et al., "Who Wears MAGA Hat?."; Buyuker et al., "Race Politics American Presidency."
[345] Mason, Wronski, and Kane, "Activating Animus."
[346] Mason, Wronski, and Kane, "Activating Animus," 1515-16.

then further adding a host of other factors, one of which is partisanship, gets the model to explain 64% of the variance.[347] Partisan identity does, however, account for around 10 percent of the variance in belief in the great replacement, second in influence to racial resentment which explains 38%.[348] It would therefore be misleading to say 'real Americans' are simply those who identify as Republicans. The literature on polarisation suggests, however, that affective polarisation and negative partisanship may have made it easier for those who believe in the great replacement that Democrats are responsible for it, as half of those with insurrectionist sentiment do.[349]

Among the spaces where such conspiracy theories are spread is right-wing partisan media. Research has shown consumption of such media increases affective polarisation.[350] R. Kelly Garrett, Jacob Long, and Min Seon Jeong link this increased affective polarisation from partisan media to increased misperceptions about the other side. They found use of conservative media increased affective polarisation for Republicans, which in turn increased misperceptions about Obama and misperceptions that Trump had been cleared of collusion with Russia (the data was from a 2016 survey, before any official investigations). A similar effect was not found for Democrats and liberal media, and misperceptions about Republicans.[351] Though the authors do not speculate why this is so,[352] others argue that the right-wing media landscape is more extremely polarised, in a way that liberal or left-wing media is not.[353] Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts argue the media ecosystem of "the radicalized right" plays "the central role" in "the current crisis of disinformation and misinformation."[354] Examining how this media eco-system contributes to 'real Americans'' perception of threat is the task of the next section.

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[347] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 29.
[348] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 30.
[349] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 27-28.
[350] Levendusky, "Partisan Media Exposure."
[351] Garrett, Long, and Jeong, "Partisan Media to Misperception."
[352] Garrett, Long, and Jeong, "Partisan Media to Misperception," 505.
[353] Zimmer, "Writing (Pre-)History "Polarized" Present," 406.
[354] Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, 15.

The media landscape

Data from CPOST suggest greater proportions of those supportive of the insurrection consume conservative media such as Fox News, Newsmax, and OAN, and use alternative social media such as Gab, Parler, and Telegram than do people in the general population.[355] Despite this, regular social media, such as Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter are still cited by twice as many as a major source of news, suggesting alt-social media,[356] at least for news, is not the primary vector for mobilising and threatening narratives for 'real Americans'—right-wing conservative media seems to play a greater role.

This is not altogether surprising, as conservative media has been responsible for spreading many of the ideas that contribute to the sense of threat 'real Americans' feel. While white genocide and replacement theory has been a persistent staple of far-right discourse, Miller-Idriss argues, it is only recently it has migrated into the mainstream, in part thanks to elites who "use the language of replacement, invasion, infestation, and a flood of illegals."[357] These elites rely on conservative media to spread their message, who in doing so can also elevate the sense of threat by contributing to dehumanising narratives about immigrants.[358] The term 'invasion' in particular has been employed extensively by Fox and the Trump campaign to refer to immigrants and the southern border.[359]

The frame of the great replacement has also been deployed frequently on Fox News.[360] Tucker Carlson in particular has pushed narratives of white replacement and rampant anti-white discrimination many times on his highly rated show.[361] In a September 2021

[355] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 36.
[356] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 36.
[357] Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 53.
[358] Esses, Medianu, and Lawson, "Role Media Promoting Dehumanization," 531.
[359] Zimmer, "Trump's 'Invasion' Rhetoric."; Kaplan, "Trump Campaign Facebook 'Invasion'."; Stelter, *Hoax*, 216-18.
[360] Stelter, *Hoax*, 211.; Alba, *Great Demographic Illusion*, 44.
[361] Fox News, "Tucker: Import Voter."; Fox News, "Tucker: Death of future."

broadcast, he accused President Biden of using the language of eugenics when describing the majority-minority thesis, and described it as part of a policy called "the great replacement—the replacement of legacy Americans with more obedient people from far away countries."[362] This kind of rhetoric on Fox News, however, is not unique to the Trump era. Former host Bill O'Reilly claimed several times there was a secret agenda to change the demographics of America, and that this was the goal of "lefty zealots."[363]

There is debate about the direction of causation between increasing partisanship and partisan media consumption—after all, strong partisans are more likely to be drawn to strongly partisan media in the first place.[364] Partisan media, in other words, "may be the result of polarization and not the cause."[365] On the other hand, evidence does seem to show watching partisan media increases negative affect towards the other side.[366] These arguments are not necessarily incommensurable; it could be argued that though partisans are the ones most attracted to partisan media, their subsequent viewing of it solidifies and strengthens their views and identities.[367] On this view, 'real Americans' are drawn to such media because it aligns with their understanding of the world and it can therefore be trusted, but in doing so also reinforces and furthers that understanding of the world. To an extent, this trust-based mechanism of media choice is how all people decide what media is reporting the facts as they are. As Phillip Sergeant points out, bar what we get from direct experience, all our knowledge is mediated; our information about the world has been "processed and packaged" by someone (for example, a journalist or scientist) or something else (a media organisation or a government body). Whether we accept that mediated information as truth is in large part based on trust. Society decides the standards for fair mediation, "[b]ut of course, the dividing line between fair and unfair—between having a particular perspective on

[362] Fox News, "Tucker: Why would Biden."
[363] Kalven, "O'Reilly Claimed "Hidden Agenda"."; Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 80.
[364] Iyengar et al., "Origins Consequences Affective Polarisation," 135.
[365] Barber and McCarty, "Causes Consequences Polarization," 35.
[366] Levendusky, "Partisan Media Exposure."
[367] Finkel et al., "Political Sectarianism in America," 534.

the news (which is an inevitable part of the mediation process) and having an explicit bias—is neither clear-cut nor self-evident."[368] Where that line is may often depend on our social identity, but for those who see themselves as part of a threatened social group, it may be even more so. In Sageman's model of the turn to political violence, he argues a key phase of this process is when a politicised social identity becomes a "discursive protest community," where group members discuss, share ideas, and begin to more clearly articulate the frames that define their movement.[369] In time, "[m]embers of a protest community come to view political events from the group's point of view. News is rarely perceived objectively, but is interpreted through the prism of one's social identity and acquires different meanings for different groups."[370] 'Real Americans,' in other words, view the world through the lens of seeing the white, Christian country they grew up in changing all around them. As such, they want to watch media that sees the world the same way as they do, or in the parlance of collective action frames, they are only going to trust media with which their frames are in alignment. For many 'real Americans,' mainstream media fails this task.

Trump's repeated insistence that the "fake news media" was the "enemy of the people"[371] further enhanced the frame that any media source that reported against 'real American's' preferred narrative was spreading false information and doing so knowingly. Daniel Kreiss argues Trump's ability to escape journalistic fact checks and lie about reality with little electoral penalty[372] shows "significant numbers of the public see journalism as lacking the legitimacy to produce objective truth."[373] "While journalists (and many journalism scholars) cling to the assumption that there is one shared civic epistemology that underlays public debate," he writes, "an extensive body of evidence suggests otherwise."[374] The implication of Kreiss's argument is that continued belief in falsehoods is not simply a matter of people being misinformed with the wrong facts—a malady that could be cured with giving them the

[368] Sergeant, *Art of Political Storytelling*, 162-63.
[369] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 18-19.
[370] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 20.
[371] Davis, "'Enemy of the People'."
[372] Swire et al., "Processing Political Misinformation."; Nyhan et al., "Fact-Checks Literally Not Seriously?."
[373] Kreiss, "Fragmenting of Civl Sphere," 452.
[374] Kreiss, "Fragmenting of Civl Sphere," 452.

right facts—but instead a result of different epistemologies formed in concert with different social and political identities.[375] In arguing for a similar diagnosis of the problem, Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook note that "alternative epistemological communit[ies are] not easily punctured by empirical evidence or corrections issued by 'elitist' media or politicians."[376] This means, as Kelly Garrett, Brian Weeks, and Rachel Neo found, that people can still believe falsehoods in line with their views even when they "know that their beliefs are inconsistent with claims made by journalists, fact checkers, scientists, etc."[377]

One explanation for the ability to seeming proliferation of belief in actual fake news—that is, false or misleading news stories such as the idea that the 2020 election was stolen—is motivated reasoning. However, evidence for what role this plays is conflicted. Dan Kahan found evidence the people who were best at analytic thinking were most likely to engage in motivated reasoning.[378] Kahan and his co-authors theorised in another paper this was due to "identity-protective cognition," the idea that people with superior reasoning skills would use them to justify beliefs that protect their identity, rather than for assessing their truth or falsehood.[379] Similar research by Freddie Jennings found that "people do not just use motivated reasoning to defend opinions, they construct opinions to defend their social identity."[380] Other research has found conflicting evidence. In their pithily titled paper "Lazy, not Biased," Gordon Pennycook and David Rand find those who engage in analytic thinking are less likely to believe fake news is true, and therefore argue those who believe fake news to be true are not displaying sophisticated mental gymnastics and motivated reasoning acuity but instead simply not being reflective thinkers.[381] Further research found that active deliberation in judging of the accuracy of news headlines increased belief in true headlines

[375] Kreiss, "Fragmenting of Civl Sphere," 455-56.
[376] Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, "Beyond Misinformation," 357.
[377] Garrett, Weeks, and Neo, "Wedge Between Evidence Beliefs," 341.
[378] Kahan, "Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, Reflection."
[379] Kahan et al., "Motivated Numeracy Enlightened Self-Government."
[380] Jennings, "Uninformed Electorate," 542.
[381] Pennycook and Rand, "Lazy, Not Biased."

and decreased it for false headlines, even when the headlines aligned with partisan beliefs—a result that does not support the motivated reasoning account.[382]

Whatever the cause, the change in what is seen as objective truth in news can be understood as part of a broader change in what Michel Foucault would call society's "regime of truth":

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[383]

This does not have to be read as relativizing all forms of knowledge, but merely as acknowledging that the production, dissemination, and acquisition of knowledge are social processes. Those processes can be better or worse at aligning with truth in an objective sense.

Foucault argued these regimes of truth in western societies are characterized by five traits, one of which in particular seems to have changed since the '70s when he wrote these words: "[Truth] is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)."[384] The rise of the internet and social media has meant traditional gatekeepers on knowledge are certainly no longer the exclusive controllers of truth, even if they are arguably still dominant.

For many early observers, the internet was viewed as an unbridled good for democracy. It would provide near-free access to information and the ability for open communication and deliberation to occur.[385] With no more gatekeepers, previously marginalized voices would

[382] Bago, Rand, and Pennycook, "Fake News, Fast Slow."
[383] Foucault, *Power/Knowlege*, 131.
[384] Foucault, *Power/Knowlege*, 131-32.
[385] Bail, *Breaking Social Media Prism*, 45.; Bor and Petersen, "Psychology Online Political Hostility," 1.

have equal access to the digital public square.[386] Such idealised visions are less heartily defended today.

There are what might be called two schools of thought about effects of social media on radicalisation: the quantitative and the qualitative. The quantitative view suggests that there is nothing new about the way social media and the internet interacts with extreme social movements. All it does is amplify already existing mechanisms and pathways; like other communications technologies that have come before, it can reduce the communicative frictions between members of a "discursive community,"[387] and it "provides a cheap and efficient way to communicate, network and organize meetings or make other arrangements, which in turn leads to a better integration of each member into the movement."[388] The qualitative view, on the other hand, argues that the structure of social networks is fundamentally different and therefore the effects it can produce in its users are unique to those platforms. YouTube's recommendations system and social-network structure, for example, has been argued to lead people down rabbit holes of conspiracy theories and increasingly extreme right-wing content.[389] Manoel Horta Ribeiro and colleagues found evidence that those in their study who were currently watching extreme alt-right content had in the past watched "alt-lite" and "intellectual dark web" content, and that they were able to find pathways through YouTube's recommendations from the latter to the former.[390]

This idea that the structure of the platform influences how its users relate with media would appear to be supported by research that shows the diversity of media sources individuals encounter and the partisan or ideological orientation of those sources is associated with different platforms in different ways— Facebook use, for example, was associated with a greater consumptions of diverse news sources (though not as much as Reddit use) as well as greater shifts towards partisan media sources (most notably for

386 Sergeant, *Art of Political Storytelling*, 161.
387 Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 18-20.
388 Koehler, "Radical Online," 118.
389 Lewis, *Alternative Influence*.; Roose, "Making a YouTube Radical."
390 Ribeiro et al., "Auditing Radicalization Pathways YouTube."

conservatives), whereas Reddit use was associated with more moderate sources.[391] Some social media companies would appear to buy-in to this second view too. Internal documents from Facebook show in-house researchers argued in 2019 that the core mechanics of the Facebook itself—"virality, recommendations, and optimizing for engagement"—were a significant reason for the spread of misinformation and hate speech on the platform.[392] This fact, they argued, meant Facebook could not do nothing and consider itself a neutral platform, as its algorithms would in effect be amplifying harmful content.[393]

One reasonably clear effect the internet and social media appears to have had on 'real Americans' is in stoking their belief in conspiracy theories, particularly related to QAnon. What began in 2017 on an obscure 4chan forum[394] eventually made its way onto mainstream social media, where it was able to be recommended to people who otherwise would never have come across it. In July of 2019, an internal Facebook researcher set up a fake account for a "conservative Mom" named Carol Smith. Within a week, the account's feed was being recommended QAnon groups, and by three weeks it was full of "misleading, polarizing and low-quality content."[395] How conspiracy theories fit into the threat narrative for 'real Americans' is the subject of the next section.

Conspiracy theories

Belief in conspiracy theories is not rare among Americans.[396] It is also true to say conspiracies in politics and world events also sometimes exist,[397] the Watergate scandal being perhaps the most uncontroversial example. However, the open embrace of conspiracy theories by political leaders in the past often saw them dismissed as cranks. Among the reasons for conspiracism's growing influence, Michael Barkun argues, is the fact conspiracy

[391] Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray, "Understanding Echo Chambers," 1635-38.
[392] Isaac, "Facebook Wrestles With Features."
[393] Isaac, "Facebook Wrestles With Features."
[394] NCRI. and PERIL., *The QAnon Conspiracy*, 6.
[395] Mac and Frenkel, "Facebook's Employees Election Role."
[396] Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy Theories Mass Opinion."
[397] Andersen, *Fantasyland*, 88.; Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, 14.

theories—birther theories about Obama being the first to do so—have now been able to enter the mainstream of political discourse without entirely discrediting and marginalising those who peddle them.[398]

The conspiracy theories at the heart of January 6—the great replacement, QAnon, and the big lie (the name given to Trump's claim the 2020 was stolen from him[399])—all have a distinctly populist shape to them.[400] Central to the notion of populism is the split in society between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite."[401] At their core, all three of these conspiracy theories blame some nefarious elite—be it Democrats, the deep state, or economically powerful Jews—for the crimes the theories believe are happening. The other reason these theories should be considered populist theories is that Donald Trump, a man seen as playing a central role in fighting against those elites responsible, is seen as a representative of "the pure people," or in other words, an authentic populist leader. As such, Trump was believed to have the best interests of "the pure people" at heart, and would do anything to stop the atrocities those conspiracies insisted were occurring. "Populist leaders build groups of loyal followers who are willing to do whatever they are asked," Lane Crothers and Grace Burgener argue, "because they are under the impression that their leader is doing the same for them."[402] How Trump—a famous and wealthy businessman from New York—could be seen as an authentic populist leader might on first glance seem puzzling. Yet as Mudde and Kaltwasser note, in the populist mind the line between the people and the elite is drawn on moral, not socioeconomic grounds.[403] Trump was therefore able to frame himself as a political outsider. His willingness to take on political correctness signalled to his followers that he was authentic and that he was not part of the establishment.[404]

Berger argues conspiracy narratives of this kind paint the out-group as extraordinarily powerful but illegitimate, and the in-group as powerless but morally virtuous—a framing

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[398] Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, 230.
[399] Dean and Altemeyer, *Authoritarian Nightmare*, 285.
[400] Crothers and Burgener, "Insurrectionary Populism?," 11-14.
[401] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6.
[402] Crothers and Burgener, "Insurrectionary Populism?," 11.
[403] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 71.
[404] Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan, "Authentic Appeal Lying Demagogue," 24.

that justifies extreme action in response.[405] Research on how conspiracy beliefs affect people's choice of political action aligns with this thinking. Study participants who were asked to adopt a "high conspiracy mentality," where they imagined they confidently believed "that a few powerful groups decided about the fate of millions of people and that politicians were nothing more than marionettes controlled by disguised powers"—in other words, that their options for political action through regular, legal engagement were seen as non-existent—were more likely to say they would use the non-normative political actions described, some of which included violence against people in power and police officers.[406] The study has its limitations—the use of terrorism wasn't explicitly mentioned and the participants weren't actual conspiracists—but as the authors note, it does at least show "once people accept a basic belief of conspiracy believers, adopting non-normative violent means to pursue one's political goals becomes—if not inevitable—certainly a seemingly logical decision to ordinary people."[407]

Why people were so willing to believe the conspiracy theories at the heart of January 6 and the perception of threat 'real Americans' feel is difficult to say with any certainty. An answer that aligns with the theory of social identity/social movements I have adopted to explain January 6, however, might be that conspiracy theories in this instance functioned to maintain the in-group's sense of social reality. A shared social reality is a framework for understanding and interpreting the world that is informed as much by intra-group communications as much as it is the objective world.[408] Because this reality is socially constructed and sometimes difficult to test empirically, social groups can (to an extent) adopt different theories of reality based on their interests.[409] The idea of shared social reality is not meant to imply all knowledge is completely divorced from objective reality, but instead to acknowledge our understanding of reality is necessarily mediated through social

[405] Berger, *Extremism*, 85.
[406] Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty, "Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview."
[407] Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty, "Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview," 77.
[408] Echterhoff, "Shared-Reality Theory."
[409] Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 137-38.

connections and our particular perspective on the world. People are motivated to maintain shared reality in part due to their desire to maintain social relationships; people are therefore likely to "'tune' relationship-relevant attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward others" in the group who also share that reality.[410] In the face of perceived group threat, the motivation to strengthen the in-group[411] should also strengthen the desire the maintain the in-group's shared reality.[412] If that shared reality is based in part on conspiracies, then perceived group threat might be expected to increase an individual's willingness to accept conspiracy theories. This aligns with Federico, Williams, and Vitriol's work on what they call "system identity threat," the perception that the fundamental social identity at the core of society is being changed or threatened. "When individuals perceive that societal change is undermining fundamental values and challenging the meaning of what it means to be a part of their society," the authors explain, "they may adopt a more conspiracy-oriented mindset and become more willing to endorse CTs [conspiracy theories]."[413] This also aligns with Jan-Willem van Prooijen's existential threat model of conspiracy theories, where existential threats are only theorised to promote belief in conspiracy theories when there is a salient antagonistic out-group[414]—in this case, the Democrats, the deep state, immigrants et cetera.

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[410] Jost, Ledgerwood, and Hardin, "Shared Reality, System Justification," 173.
[411] Wohl, Branscombe, and Reysen, "Perceiving Group's Future Jeopardy."
[412] Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, "Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," 540-41.
[413] Federico, Williams, and Vitriol, "System Identity Threat Conspiracy," 935.
[414] van Prooijen, "An Existential Threat Model of Conspiracy Theories."

Chapter 4: Mobilising an insurrection

In chapter two, I argued the concept of extremism is fuzzy; the borders between the extreme and the mainstream are difficult to establish in a robust manner, even though it is often possible to point to uncontroversial examples (Nazis, for instance, being the most obvious). This conceptual fuzziness, I argued, is at least part of the reason why it is difficult to categorise and understand why and how "normal" people with no links to extremist groups took part in the Capitol riot. The extremist frame can give clearer answers to why members of groups like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys took part in January 6 than it does for "normal" Trump supporters such as Jenna Ryan, a 50-year-old female real estate agent from Texas, or Robert Palmer, a 54-year-old male from Florida—both of whom have been convicted for their role in the attack.[415] Stewart Rhodes, the Oath Keepers leader who has been charged with seditious conspiracy for his role in January 6,[416] can be labelled as an extremist on most understandings of the word, but does it make sense to apply the same term to people like Ryan and Palmer? I suggested at the end of chapter two that the answer could be yes, but that an easier question would be "how did the "normal" January 6 rioters get to the point where they were willing to use violence in support of a President trying to overthrow a democratic election?"

In chapter three, I argued the best answer is to view their actions through a lens informed by social identity and social movement theory. The people who invaded the Capitol see themselves as 'real Americans'—an ascriptive notion of American identity that considers being white and Christian important to being American. 'Real Americans' feel threatened by the changing demographics of the country. Many believe, however, that this change is happening on purpose and that they are being replaced as Americans with immigrants and other racial minorities whose birth-rates are higher than the white population's. This sense of threat was able to form in part thanks to the actually changing demographics, but most importantly by the narratives that were able to form around it due to increasing polarisation,

[415] Peiser, "Capitol Rioter Says."; Feuer, "Man Gets 5 Years."
[416] Feuer and Goldman, "Oath Keepers Leader Charged.";

changes in the media landscape, and the increasing influence of conspiracy theories. A social movement formed on behalf of the social identity of 'real Americans,' with the aim to try and protect the in-group from the out-group. Though this movement precedes Trump, he very clearly appeals to the white protectionist, Christian nationalist, and anti-immigrant sentiments at the heart of 'real Americans'' desire to defend their notion of what America should be.

How does this threatened sense of identity connect with the Capitol riot? In short, 'real Americans' believed that the election was being stolen from them and the candidate they had voted for, who was seen as one of the only politicians on their side. The Democrats, the party many consider to be responsible for wanting to destroy 'real Americans,' would be in control of both the presidency and Congress—an intolerable outcome. Something, therefore, had to be done to avert this crisis. Collective action frames about how this might be done were developed in conjunction with—though as far we know as of February 2022, not in collusion with—the Trump campaign and its efforts to overturn the election. Crucially, the violence at the Capitol came at the end of a roughly two month period characterised by Trump's continued insistence the election was stolen but also his continued inability to do anything about it, despite his best efforts. As each day went by, the opportunities to "stop the steal" became fewer and the stakes for those that remained became ever higher. Sageman describes one of the important factors in his social identity model of the turn to political violence is the protest community's disillusionment with nonviolent strategy. As the legal avenues for a social movement to address their grievances are exhausted, members are increasingly incentivised to turn to more extreme means.[417] Disillusionment with protest, Sageman notes, can help explain why "political violence often erupts at the tail end of a legal political protest campaign."[418] The protests that took place from election day to January 6 failed to change the outcome of the election. January 6 was therefore, as a Capitol Police intelligence report from January 3 argued, viewed by Trump's supporters as the "last chance" to keep him in the

[417] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 31-33.
[418] Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*, 33.

White House.[419] This last stand was necessary, because the Democrats as the architects of the great replacement (or at least in cahoots with those architects), would destroy 'real America' if they got into power. As Lane Crothers and Grace Burgener argue,

> According to the insurrectionists, elites didn't just steal the 2020 election. They stole it for a reason: to replace "real" America with a different, alien one. The stand in the U.S. Capitol, then, was for them a stand for America–an effort to "Stop the Steal" across many different dimensions.[420]

That this was a prominent narrative was clear to many in the days before the attack. The ADL wrote in a January 4 blog post discussing some of the online planning around January 6 that:

> Many extremist and mainstream Trump supporters are framing the rallies as a last stand to prevent Biden from being sworn in as the next President, and some chatter indicates that there is a desire to engage in radical and sometimes violent tactics to ensure that the election is not stolen from President Trump.[421]

The frame had resonance with 'real Americans' because maintaining Trump's presidency was seen as necessary for mitigating the existential threat of a changing America. CPOST's research found that "for every 1 standard deviation decline in the white population (~1%), the number of expected insurrectionists increases by 25%."[422] In other words, capitol rioters tended to come from places where the white population had declined the most. Bai and Federico's research shows how this population decline can increase the sense of collective existential threat, which in turn increases support for right-wing extremist groups and extremist anti-immigrant actions.[423] Were 'real Americans' not so threatened the prospect of

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[419] Davis, "Red Flags," 3 days to go.
[420] Crothers and Burgener, "Insurrectionary Populism?," 13.
[421] ADL, "Extremists Trump Supporters Plan."
[422] CPOST, *Deep, Divisive, Disturbing*, 12.
[423] Bai and Federico, "White Demographic Shifts."

a Democratic president—who would continue pursuing those changes to America they feared—it is unlikely the "normals" would have been so easily mobilised to violence.

In the face of perceived group threat, the motivation to strengthen the in-group[424] would have strengthened the desire the maintain the in-group's shared reality.[425] Belief that election fraud had taken place is consistent with the shared reality of 'real Americans'. Trump's claims of election fraud did not have their genesis in 2020—after losing the popular vote in the 2016 election, he claimed he would have won it had all the votes from illegal immigrants not been counted.[426] That said, George Musgrove argues Trump did not create the receptivity to voter-fraud narratives among his base, as Republican operatives had "been claiming for more than half a century that voter fraud, ostensibly by African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, undocumented immigrants, possibly even felons, all supported by the Democratic Party and ignored by the mainstream media, was rampant"[427] This aligns with the broader narrative of the great replacement, which says that the Democrats have already let in millions of illegal immigrants to overpower the vote of 'real American' citizens. Even as many specific claims about election fraud were shown to have no substance behind them, in many minds this did not matter because many of the people who were voting were assumed to be illegitimate. In other words, too much of the electorate had already been replaced, so belief in widespread fraud was resistant to the obvious shortcomings of many of the Trump campaign's claims.

In a speech following Trump's second acquittal, Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell said,

> the people who stormed this building believed they were acting on the wishes and instructions of their president. The leader of the free world cannot spend

[424] Wohl, Branscombe, and Reysen, "Perceiving Group's Future Jeopardy."
[425] Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, "Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," 540-41.; Jost, Ledgerwood, and Hardin, "Shared Reality, System Justification," 181-82.
[426] Neiwart, *Alt-America*, 329.; Leonnig and Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix*, 279-80.
[427] Musgrove, "The Ingredients for "Voter Fraud" Conspiracies," 229.

> weeks thundering that shadowy forces are stealing our country and then feign surprise when people believe him and do reckless things.[428]

This accords with many statements from rioters who say they were in Washington and marched to the Capitol because they thought that is what Trump wanted.[429] Members of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys considered Trump to be the one calling for action on January 6 too.[430] For the Proud Boys in particular, it was Trump's election debate message to the group to to "stand back and stand by" that engaged them fully.[431] Enrique Tarrio, leader of the Proud Boys, got the message, writing on Parler soon after Trump's comment, "Standing by sir."[432] Another Proud Boy, Joe Biggs, posted on Parler that "Trump basically said to go fuck them [antifa and the left] up! this makes me so happy."[433] Biggs would end up playing a prominent role in the Proud Boys contingent that attacked the Capitol.[434] I will come to examine how these extreme actors interacted with the "normals" in the lead up to January 6, and how the frames that lead to violence were able to flourish, in part, in the Stop the Steal movement. First, however, the primary mobilising actor—Trump—needs to be examined.

Planting the seeds of insurrection

It is important to first establish that Trump was trying to overturn the election, because it is key to establishing that the rioters were acting with purpose and not simply being swept away in rally that spiralled out of control. Trump supporters were well aware of what he was trying to do, and as many of them said in the aftermath, they were only too happy to try and help in his goal of stopping Biden's certification as president.[435]

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[428] Leonard, "'Practically and Morally Responsible'."
[429] Pape and CPOST, *Understanding American Domestic Terrorism*, 40.
[430] Argentino et al., *Far from Gone*, 15-16.;
[431] Leonnig and Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix*, 294-95.
[432] Davis, "Red Flags," 102 days to go.
[433] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," September 29, 2020.
[434] Hsu and Weiner, "Proud Boys conspired ".
[435] Pape and Ruby, "Capitol Rioters."

That Trump's intention was to overturn the election is clear. Notes released from a December 27 conversation between Trump and senior officials from the Justice Department show Trump asked the then acting attorney general Jeffrey Rosen to "just say the election was corrupt + leave the rest to me and the R. Congressmen."[436] On January 2, Trump called Georgia secretary of state Brad Raffensperger and asked him "to find 11,780 votes," one more than he would need to flip the state.[437] He was doing all he could, behind the scenes as well as in public lawsuits to keep a hold on the presidency.[438]

Trump spent much of his campaign warning of election fraud, laying the groundwork for a rejection of the results before any purported evidence of fraud had been found.[439] The first concrete mobilising motions towards January 6 could be said to have started in the early hours of November 4. In a speech full of false claims of a rigged election, Trump said "[t]his is a fraud on the American public. This is an embarrassment to our country. We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election."[440] In the weeks that followed, Trump and his Republican proxies filed around 60 lawsuits to no avail.[441] These collective failures, alongside Trump's inability to pressure officials behind the scenes,[442] meant the last chance to turn things around was January 6. Trump was aware something like this might be necessary to hold onto power long before election day. He first referenced the idea that the House in Congress could determine the outcome of the election in the event of a disputed election, saying in a rally on September 26 that "I don't want to go back to Congress either, even though we have an advantage if we go back to Congress. Does everyone understand that? I think it's 26 to 22 or something because it's counted one vote per state."[443]

A memo developed in the White house by legal scholar John Eastman outlined the plan: several states were going to send alternate electors to the Senate to be certified, against the

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[436] Barrett and Dawsey, "Trump to Acting AG."
[437] Gardner, "Trump Pressures Georgia Secretary."
[438] Rutenberg, Corasaniti, and Feuer, "Trump's Claims Died Court."
[439] Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, 131.
[440] Rucker, Olorunnipa, and Linskey, "Trump Falsely Asserts Fraud."
[441] Rutenberg, Corasaniti, and Feuer, "Trump's Claims Died Court."
[442] Gardner, "Trump Pressures Georgia Secretary."
[443] Davis, "Red Flags," 102 days to go.

legitimate electors for Biden. As president of the senate, the vice president was responsible for running the certification process. He therefore had the power to declare that ongoing disputes about who were the legitimate electors from those states meant none of them could be deemed legitimate. As the electors from the states would not then be counted, Trump would have a majority of those electors who were counted, and therefore could be announced as president re-elect. If the Democrats objected on the basis of no candidate reaching the 270 electoral votes required now that many had been dismissed, the vice president could send the decision of who is to be elected president to the house. As outlined by the 12th amendment, the matter is decided with each state getting one vote, no matter its population. Because Republicans represented more states, despite having fewer representatives, they would be able to elect Trump president.[444] Despite Trump's best efforts to convince him, Pence remained sceptical, convinced by his own advisors that the vice president's power in the process was only ceremonial.[445] In a meeting with Trump on the evening of January 5th, Pence told Trump he would not follow the plan, and that if Trump has "a strategy for the 6th, it really shouldn't involve me because I'm just there to open the envelopes."[446] Trump could therefore not rely on Pence to fulfil his role and would instead need some other

The centrality of this plan to Trump's efforts to steal the election became even more indisputable in January 2022, when in a statement questioning why Congress was attempting to revise the Electoral Count Act if in fact the vice president really does have only ceremonial power, he said "[a]ctually, what they are saying, is that Mike Pence did have the right to change the outcome, and they now want to take that right away. Unfortunately, he didn't exercise that power, he could have overturned the Election!"[447]

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[444] Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, 209-12.
[445] Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, 225-26.
[446] Woodward and Costa, *Peril*, 228-29.
[447] Wagner, Sonmez, and Dawsey, "Trump Suggests Pence 'Overturned'."

Stop the Steal

As Trump was saying the election was stolen and trying to overturn it, his supporters were organising too. The Stop the Steal movement is where many of the actors present on January 6 first aligned—"normal" or mainstream and extreme alike.[448] Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio referred to the November 14 "Million MAGA March" as "the moment we really united everybody under one banner."[449] Trump's failure to condemn the Proud Boys opened the door for them to enter the Stop the Steal movement, and painted them as legitimate actors in the eyes of many 'real Americans.'

The alignment of extreme and mainstream actors in the lead up to January 6 is important, because it helps shed light on an important question: would the "normals" have entered the Capitol that day had it not been for the more organised elements present? Though it is difficult to know, there are good reasons to consider the answer is likely no. For one, without the more extreme groups the specific mobilising narratives that suggested the Capitol be stormed instead of merely protested in front of may not have been developed. Members of the both the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers have been indicted on conspiracy charges—seditious conspiracy in the case of Stewart Rhodes, the leader of the Oath Keepers.[450] It would appear, then, that the collective action frames for taking the Capitol were developed by these small and structured groups, rather than spontaneously developing in the broader non-hierarchically-organised mass of 'real Americans.'[451] When it came time to take action on the day, Proud Boys were among the first to break through the initial police lines and into the Capitol building itself.[452] However, the frames outlining the storming of the Capitol clearly resonated with many "normal" Americans, as evidenced by their willingness to join in.

[448] Hughes, ""Stop the Steal" Symbology."
[449] Kaplan and Sapien, "New Details Suggest," One Nation Under God.
[450] Feuer, "Stay Scattered Avoid Police."; Feuer and Goldman, "Oath Keepers Leader Charged."
[451] Kriner and Lewis, "Oath Keepers January 6," 10-13.; Kriner and Lewis, "Pride & Prejudice," 34-35.
[452] Kriner and Lewis, "Pride & Prejudice."

The question of the relationship between the "normals" and the extreme actors can be considered in the other direction too—would the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers have been as willing to break the law and enter into combat if there had not been huge numbers of "normal" Trump supporters present who they felt confident would follow them into the Capitol? It is again difficult to say, but the fact that they felt they had the blessing of the president and large masses of his supporters may have given them a degree of cover that was necessary to turn the mobilising frames they had developed from talk to action.

Counterfactuals aside, the Stop the Steal movement provided the platform for extremists and "normals" to intermingle, and where "normal" could be exposed to collective action frames developed by more extreme actors. Though it was not then widely supported, the slogan of "Stop the Steal" began in 2016 as the name of an activist group founded by the political operative and Trump backer Roger Stone. The group's stated goal was to conduct exit polls and compare them with the official tallies, though they were accused of attempting voter intimidation as they mostly planned to operate in minority-dense areas.[453]

The 2020 incarnation of Stop the Steal was founded by the "far-right provocateur" Ali Alexander.[454] The success of the 2020 incarnation owes much to social media for its ability to spread quickly. Though the original Stop the Steal Facebook group was live for less than a day before it was banned on November 5, it amassed over 320,000 members in that time.[455] Hughes and Miller-Idriss argue the mass bans and exodus of Q followers, election-fraud misinformation spreaders, and other far-right actors from mainstream platforms in late 2020, and their subsequent arrival on platforms like Parler and Telegram, helped to create a community with a concentrated and shared sense of grievance around the election.[456] Luke Munn argues Parler functioned as "preparatory media," in that it was an environment where the specific collection action frames—for instance, about storming the Capitol—were developed. The predevelopment of these frames "allowed Trump's incendiary but broad

[453] Kruzel, "Pro-Trump Group Warns Members."
[454] Kaplan and Sapien, "New Details Suggest," One Nation Under God.
[455] Frenkel, "Rise 'Stop Steal' Facebook."
[456] Hughes and Miller-Idriss, "Uniting for Total Collapse," 16.

rhetoric to be slotted into an existing framework, amplifying the group's animosity against certain targets and the urgency of attaining certain goals."[457] For example, one post with 50,000 views read "CALLING ALL PATRIOTS. DONALD TRUMP HAS CALLED FOR US TO COME TO THE NATIONS CAPITOL FOR THE LAST STAND AGAINST THE GLOBALISTS."[458]

Despite alternative social media's role in providing a less restrictive space for violent frames to develop, Stop The Steal was far from limited to those platforms; engagement with Stop the Steal on mainstream social media channels was significant, peaking at several times in the interim period between election day and January 6.[459] The movement was not entirely cleaved from the platform, however. An internal Facebook document detailed how the narratives and groups around Stop the Steal grew and spread through mass invites but also organic growth.[460]Another internal Facebook report from January 7 showed content that potentially violated Facebook's policies was seven times higher in the weeks before January 6, with many posts calling for violence to overthrow the government.[461]

On November 7, the day most major media outlets projected Biden would be the next President, Alexander, alongside numerous other actors, including white nationalist Nick Fuentes and Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, begin promoting the "Million MAGA March" scheduled for November 14 in Washington.[462] The rally featured a fix of mainstream Trump supporters, as well as Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, white nationalists, and followers of Alex Jones, the conspiracist and figurehead of InfoWars who was also a speaker at the rally.[463] Some of those aligned with the Stop the Steal movement expressed discomfort with some of the extreme actors Alexander had allowed to take part.[464] Nonetheless, Trump himself did

[457] Munn, "More Than a Mob," Introduction.
[458] Munn, "More Than a Mob," Mobilizing.
[459] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," Metrics.
[460] Mac, Silverman, and Lytvynenko, "Facebook Report Insurrection."
[461] Mac and Frenkel, "Facebook's Employees Election Role."
[462] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline."
[463] Kaplan and Sapien, "New Details Suggest," One Nation Under God.; Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," November 10, 2020.; Hayden, "Far-Right Extremist Heading Washington."
[464] Kaplan and Sapien, "New Details Suggest," One Nation Under God.

not distance himself from the rally; he diverted his motorcade to drive past it and wave to his supporters,[465] in effect endorsing its message.

December 12 saw another rally in Washington, organised and promoted by the same groups and individuals as the November 14 event. On stage, Alexander told the crowd January 6 would be the next point of protest, should the electoral college confirm Biden's victory in two days' time.[466] He warned Republicans that if they did not object to the certification on January 6, that he and the movement would "throw them out of office."[467]

On December 19, Trump tweeted "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!"[468] Members of the TheDonald.win, the new home of the banned Reddit forum r/TheDonald, took Trump's tweet as a call to action, with one post reading "Well, shit. We've got marching orders, bois," and another noting "He [Trump] can't exactly tell you to revolt. This is the closest he'll ever get."[469] The groups responsible for the prior protests also reacted quickly; Women for America First announced a January 6 rally and launched a companion website.[470] A few days later, Alexander published a video linking to WildProtest.com, that explicitly mentioned assembling outside the Capitol by 1pm, after attending the rally at the ellipse earlier in the day. A day later, he tweeted the video and wrote "President Trump invited you so now it's your turn to invite a fellow patriot."[471]

Some reporting suggests as January 6 neared, however, there were disagreements between the protest groups supporting Trump. *ProPublica* reported that despite being aligned in planning and promoting the November 14 and December 12 rallies,[472] the group Women for America First, led by Amy Kremer, a Republican operative who was heavily involved in the Tea Party movement, considered the Stop the Steal faction to have become

[465] Leonnig and Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix*, 384.
[466] Davis, "Red Flags," 25 days to go.
[467] Leonnig and Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix*, 418.
[468] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," December 19, 2020.
[469] SITE Intelligence Group, "Trump Tweet Sparked Plots."
[470] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," December 19, 2020.
[471] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," December 25, 2020; December 26, 20.
[472] Davis, "Red Flags," 53 days to go, 36 days to go.; Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," November 8, 2020.

too extreme.[473] It was Women for America First who had the permit for the event on the White House ellipse where Trump spoke on the morning of January 6; Stop the Steal only had a permit to rally on Capitol grounds. The ellipse permit, however, specifically forbade an "organized march"—Kremer therefore reportedly did not want Alexander, Jones, and others from the Stop the Steal faction speaking at the ellipse rally and encouraging their planned march and causing potential legal headaches.[474] How deep this rift was in reality, however, is difficult to say. Kremer used the hashtag #StoptheSteal in a January 2 tweet promoting the ellipse rally, and the group was listed as a coalition partner alongside Stop the Steal, WildProtest.com, and others on marchtosaveamerica.com, a site promoting both the January 6 rally as well as the one scheduled for the evening before.[475] In the end, however, it was Trump himself speaking at that rally who said "I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard."[476]

Trump's speech on January 6

Though Trump's speech on the morning of January 6 should not be viewed as the whole story—after all, much of the mobilising had already occurred to get people to D.C.—its importance in directly mobilising those present cannot be understated. The collective action frame Trump laid out in his speech said to the 'real Americans' present that if they did not act now, they would lose their country because the Democrats would win and continue to change America against their interests, and continue to replace them as Americans.

Whether Trump wanted the violence to occur is difficult to say. The fact he did nothing to stop the attack for 187 minutes once it began suggests at the very least an indifference to

[473] Kaplan and Sapien, "New Details Suggest," "Historic Day!".
[474] Kaplan and Sapien, "New Details Suggest," "Historic Day!".
[475] Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline," January 2, 2021; January 3, 21.
[476] Naylor, "Trump's Jan. 6 Speech."

what was occurring.[477] He also did not hesitate from piling on Mike Pence during the riot, as the following tweet, sent once the Capitol had been breached, demonstrates:

> Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth![478]

That he views violence as a legitimate response to Pence's inaction is also clear. When confronted with the fact his supporters were chanting "Hang Mike Pence," he said it was "common sense," arguing they were "very angry" that Pence "pass[ed] on a fraudulent vote to Congress."[479]

Whatever Trump's actual intentions with his speech, what is important for mobilisation is not the unknowable intentions in someone's mind but the perception of what those intentions are. Judging by their actions, the "normals" and the more extreme actors present acted out what they thought their president desired. His speech aligned with the frame that gave them a reason to be in Washington D.C. for. To be clear, Trump did say in the speech that "I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard."[480] Yet aside from that one instance, peaceful protest was not mentioned again—the rest of the speech was in alignment, or at least not in contradiction with, the violent and confrontational collective action frames that suggested storming the Capitol. For instance, Trump outlined clearly why everyone was there, and who was responsible:

> All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they're doing. And stolen by the fake news media. That's what they've done and what they're doing. We will

[477] Rucker, "Bloodshed."
[478] Rucker, "Bloodshed," section 1.
[479] Pengelly, "Trump Defended 'Hang Pence'."
[480] Naylor, "Trump's Jan. 6 Speech."

> never give up, we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved. Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore and that's what this is all about. And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with: We will stop the steal.[481]

“Our country” is a way of speaking directly to ‘real Americans’—in the frame, the country belongs to them. The phrase “we will not take it anymore” stokes a sense of victimhood and loss.

> But just remember this: You're stronger, you're smarter, you've got more going than anybody. And they try and demean everybody having to do with us. And you're the real people, you're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation.

The “they” Trump mentions presumably means the Democrats and the media, the people who have no respect for ‘real Americans’ and want to replace them. ‘Real Americans’ “built this nation”—not the people “who tore down our nation,” likely a reference to Black Lives Matters protestors and Antifa—two groups Trump frequently frames as sources of violence.[482] Metaphors for violence are used by Trump, however, throughout the speech:

“Republicans are constantly fighting like a boxer with his hands tied behind his back. It's like a boxer. And we want to be so nice. We want to be so respectful of everybody, including bad people. And we're going to have to fight much harder.”

Republicans here are framed as the victims, being attacked by Democrats and others who are willing to use unfair means to defeat them. “We’re going to have to fight much harder” suggests an escalation in tactics is required. Another phrase used later evokes similar sentiments:

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[481] All quotes from Trump’s speech below come from Naylor, "Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech."
[482] Bump, "Trump Black Lives Matter."; Perez and Hoffman, "Trump Antifa Labeled Terrorist."

"You'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong."

Footage assembled by the New York Times shows as Trump says these words, different people in the crowd can be heard shouting "storm the Capitol!," "invade the Capitol building!," "let's take the Capitol," "take the Capitol," and "let's take it."[483] The people in the videos are not identified, but even if we assume that it was members of organised groups who were attempting to spread the idea of storming the Capitol, it seemed to have resonated with many in the crowd.

As the speech continues, Trump begins providing justifications for radical action:

> The Constitution doesn't allow me to send them back to the States. Well, I say, yes it does, because the Constitution says you have to protect our country and you have to protect our Constitution, and you can't vote on fraud. And fraud breaks up everything, doesn't it? When you catch somebody in a fraud, you're allowed to go by very different rules.

While the reference to "very different rules" can be interpreted as Trump saying Pence has the power to send the votes back to the states, it is also compatible with an interpretation the legitimises the idea of storming the Capitol. Once again, it is impossible to know Trump's true intentions and desires—but given the frames already floating around, the statement does not conflict with some crowd members' interpretation that Trump wants them to take drastic action. The final line I will point out is perhaps the most important, given how sharply it summarises the content and tone of the speech:

"And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

[483] The New York Times, "Day of Rage," 6:40-7:12.

This final sentence is the clearest articulation of the mobilising frame; “If you don’t fight like hell”—that is, if you, the ‘real Americans,’ do not take action now to keep me in office—“you’re not going to have a country anymore,”—in other words, the America you know and love will be destroyed. Narratives of existential threat, as Holger Marks and Janina Pawelz note, suggest “a need for self-defense and thus a situation, in which everything is permitted, if not necessary”[484]

[484] Marcks and Pawelz, "Victimhood to Violence," 2.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The goal of this thesis has been to understand how regular Trump supporters—"normals," as I have called them—came to engage in political violence against their government. Such actions would usually thought to be confined to extremists—however, analysis of those who have been charged for their involvement in storming the Capitol do not match the typical right-wing extremist profile and many had no affiliation with extremist groups. Thus, to analyse their political violence as if they were just any other extremists would seem to be missing something important about them, with the potential to come to misleading conclusions. The first step in understanding the political violence of the "normals" would be to critically examine the conceptual tools that are normally used to analyse political violence.[485]

I began, then, by examining the concept of extremism. I argued that part of what makes understanding the "normals" and their actions on January 6 difficult may be the limitations of the concept of extremism itself. In particular, the extremist frame can serve to obscure the shared features of the mainstream and the extreme, while also failing to clearly demarcate the borders between the two in a clear and consistent way. While it may be easy to identify Nazis as extremists, others do not fit so clearly into the mould. I also argued that the label of "extremist" functions to delegitimise certain actors, often related to their use of violence for an unworthy cause. What is a just cause and what is not, however, has changed over time; what once have may been considered extremism—such as abolitionism—is now seen as the moral good. Despite the limitations of the extremist frame, I ended chapter two by arguing that instead of trying to determine whether the "normals" were extremists or not (though I argued there are good reasons to consider they are), their actions could still be analysed using certain concepts from the literature, principally those relating to social identity and social movement theory, without committing to explicit demarcations between which actors are extremists and which are not.

[485] CPOST, *American Face of Insurrection*, 5.

In chapter three, using the social identity and social movement perspectives, I outlined a theory of 'real Americans' who perceive the changes happening in America's demographics and culture as a threat. It was the desire to protect and defend this identity, I argued, that was behind the successful mobilisation to violence of many "normals." Collective action frames were developed that interpreted the world from the point of view of this identity, and gave them scripts for action on home they could defend it. They invaded the Capitol in a last ditch effort to protect their in-group—white and Christian Americans—by keeping in power a president who made it clear he would protect their interests as 'real Americans.' With Donald Trump as president, they would be able to continue fighting back against the forces that wanted to replace them as Americans with immigrants and minorities. I examined how polarisation, the media landscape, and the increasing acceptance of conspiracy theories all interacted with white identity politics and Christian nationalism to enhance the sense of threat 'real Americans' appear to feel.

In chapter four, I attempted to show how this theory fits with what we know about January 6—that the rioters were trying to keep Trump in office by assisting him in stopping the certification of Biden as president; that the influence of extremist groups such as the Proud Boys contributed to the frames developed in the Stop the Steal movement; and how Trump's speech on the morning of January 6, whatever his actual intention, aligned with the frames the "normals" had for both how important it was to keep Trump in office and what he desired them to do in order to make that so.

Though I have argued the social identity/social movement perspective is the best conceptual frame to apply to what is known about the rioters and their motivations, it does not establish unequivocally that the identity-based concerns are the primary animating force behind their actions. The studies from the Chicago Project on Security and Threats provide compelling evidence that concerns about white population decline, changing demographics, and the fear of replacement are important to rioters' concerns, many of their survey conclusions come from people who merely support the insurrection, rather than actually took part in it. Nonetheless, my argument is that the theoretical perspective I have presented

provides a coherent frame for examining how “normal” people were driven to political violence, even if it may not explain it fully.

The frame I have presented would suggest future violence from this movement is possible, so long as the mobilising forces continue to exist—most importantly, Donald Trump staying influential as the mobiliser-in-chief. So long as Trump continues to be perceived as someone willing to protect the interests of ‘real Americans,’ and so long as he continues to stoke the grievances that ‘real Americans’ have, my analysis would suggest he could mobilise others to violence in the future. To be clear, the last-ditch nature of January 6 was certainly important in providing the desperation necessary for violence to occur—I am not suggesting Trump would be capable of inspiring violence for any circumstance he pleases. But if similar circumstances arise around future elections, similar violence could be inspired. Most concerning is the fact he appears to not see much wrong with the violence he already inspired. In January of 2022, he stated if he became President again in 2024, he would consider pardons for those charged for their role in January 6, “because they are being treated so unfairly.”[486] Turning the rioters into martyrs for the cause, or describing their actions as “legitimate political discourse,” as the Republican National Committee recently did,[487] will only serve to encourage further violence.

[486] Colvin, "Trump Dangles Pardons."
[487] Weisman and Epstein, "G.O.P. Declares Jan. 6."

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