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SPECIAL SECTION: ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISM

Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States

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The far-right anti-government extremist movement poses a significant threat in the United States. The January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol illustrates the capacity of this movement to plan and mount violent attacks against government targets and democratic institutions. In this article, we explore how the organisational and tactical characteristics of the far-right anti-government movement in the United States enable it to thrive despite the dangers it poses to the public. We argue that its deep-seated ideological roots, fluid organisational structure, and mix of violent and nonviolent tactics make the movement difficult for federal and state authorities to proscribe, prosecute, and ultimately eliminate. US policymakers need to develop an informed response that accounts for the fluid, decentralised, and public-facing nature of anti-government extremism, as well as the pervasive distrust of federal authority that it reflects. We suggest that this approach will likely differ from the modern counter-terrorism tools that were initially designed to combat terrorist threats emanating from abroad, such as those posed by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. We ground our arguments in evidence from cases of anti-government extremist groups and followers active in the United States over the past three decades.

Keywords: anti-government extremism, counter-terrorism, political violence, far-right extremism, militia groups

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Introduction

On January 6, 2021, a violent mob stormed the United States Capitol. More than 800 people entered the building after members of the crowd broke down barricades and burst through locked entrances. A massive anti-government conspiracy inspired hundreds of individuals—some members of domestic extremist groups, such as the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters—to attack police officers with flagpoles, sledgehammers, baseball bats, and other weapons.¹ Five people were killed, and four police officers died in the months following the riot.

Anti-government extremists—those who view the government as responsible for a perceived crisis and, in response, threaten or use violence against it²—pose a major threat in the United States. According to the White House, anti-government or anti-authority extremists are one of the “most lethal elements of today’s domestic terrorism threat.”³ In particular, extremists associated with the far-right⁴—including followers of home-grown militias, online conspiracies, the Sovereign Citizens movement, and national anti-government groups—have gained significant traction in the past decades, breaching mainstream political discourse and attracting new followers to their cause. The United States is not the only country to harbour a growing anti-government movement within its borders. Rather, global anti-government and anti-authority mobilisation in recent decades has led to the emergence and growth of several extremist groups and movements around the world, including the Reichsbürger Movement (Germany), One Nation (France), Uyoku dantai (Japan), Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging Movement (South Africa), and Freemen on the Land (Canada).⁵

The resilience of anti-government extremist threats in these states is puzzling. Many of these governments have developed a set of counter-terrorism and counterextremism tools with a successful track record for curbing other extremist threats, such as jihadist terrorism. Yet, anti-government extremism continues to pose a persistent and pernicious challenge for law enforcement. Why is the anti-government threat so difficult to combat?

In this article, we aim to answer this question in the context of the United States. We argue that the organisational and tactical characteristics of the anti-government movement in the United States—namely its deep-seated ideological roots, fluid organisational structure, and mix of violent and nonviolent tactics—make it difficult for federal and state authorities to undermine. The ultra-nationalist rhetoric by the anti-government far-right provides an appealing patriotic narrative that can command broad social appeal and is difficult to proscribe as extremism. Moreover, the decentralised and fluid nature of the movement’s organisation can make it difficult to track. Individuals possess significant autonomy and can be members of multiple organisations, creating diffuse networks of loose ties that are challenging to thwart. Finally, the tactics employed by the anti-government movement are largely legal and thus are difficult to proscribe or prosecute. Though extremists’ actions are often intended to provoke violence or intimidate opponents, the US Constitution protects their freedoms of speech, assembly, and to bear arms.

The modern counter-terrorism tools typically employed by the United States do not enable federal and state officials to overcome these challenges. Rather, the methods developed to combat the post-9/11 terrorist threat are largely kinetic and designed for international contexts. We

suggest that a more effective domestic counter-terrorism strategy should exploit a key vulnerability in the anti-government movement's organisational design: its lack of cohesion. However, implementation of such recommendations will remain difficult given the highly adaptable and fast-moving nature of the anti-government threat in the United States, as well as the deep-seated, pervasive distrust of federal authority on which it feeds.

Anti-government extremism is a “slippery” concept.⁶ It is difficult to define and measure, making the study of individuals, groups, and movements associated with anti-government ideology particularly challenging. In an effort to add shape to this conceptual murkiness, this manuscript contributes a new framework for the analysis of the organisational dimensions of far-right anti-government violence and militancy. We build upon existing ideological and sociological frameworks examining the far-right and establish a set of dominant organisational forms—focusing on organisational structures, tactics, and identities—employed by anti-government extremists in the United States.⁷ We then draw on this framework to identify key vulnerabilities and assess whether modern US counter-terrorism tools can exploit these weaknesses. This work has implications for the large body of research on the efficacy of US counter-terrorism policy and pushes scholars to evaluate how these tools might perform in a domestic context.⁸

Our article proceeds in three parts. First, we evaluate the ideological, organisational, and tactical characteristics of the anti-government threat in the United States. We then examine how these traits may impact the effectiveness of modern counter-terrorism tools. We conclude with a brief discussion of implications for and extensions to other contexts, such as Western Europe.

Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States

In the last fifty years, a broad spectrum of domestic actors—including left-wing student activists, Puerto Rican nationalist separatists, racially motivated extremists, and far-right anti-government militias—have used or threatened violence against the US government. The anti-government far-right in particular has grown significantly over the past three decades, gaining new traction in the early 1990s with the advent of the “patriot” militia movement and breaching mainstream politics in 2020 with conspiracies about the COVID-19 pandemic and election fraud. Compared to the far-left, actors motivated by far-right ideologies are more likely to employ violence in pursuit of their objectives and cause more fatalities with this violence.⁹ In recent years, the anti-government far-right has posed a growing challenge for federal and state police. In a 2013–2014 survey of law enforcement personnel, respondents ranked anti-government Sovereign Citizens and militia/patriot groups as the first and third most serious terrorist threats in the United States, up from seventh and sixth place in 2006–2007.¹⁰

Why is this strand of anti-government extremism so dangerous and challenging to combat? We argue that the far-right anti-government movement's deep-seated ideological roots, fluid organisational structure, and mix of violent and nonviolent tactics make it difficult to proscribe, prosecute, and ultimately eliminate. We discuss each of these characteristics in turn, focusing specifically on the far-right anti-government extremist movement that has developed in the United States since the early 1990s.

Ideological Origins and Development

The modern anti-government movement in the United States is comprised of several elements, including patriot/militia groups (e.g. Michigan Militia), Sovereign Citizens, online conspiracy theorists (e.g. QAnon), and national organisations (e.g. Oath Keepers). Though organisationally diverse, these components of the movement are largely motivated by the same three ideological tenets: mistrust of federal authority, fear of foreign influence, and the need for paramilitary self-defence.¹¹

Anti-government extremists harbour a deep-seated mistrust of government. They believe the government is actively seeking to undermine their constitutional rights, sometimes through a hidden network of “Deep State” actors. For example, some followers believe that the US government stages “false flag” terrorist attacks to justify policies that restrict freedom of assembly or access to firearms.

US anti-government extremists also fear foreign influence in domestic politics.¹² This belief is grounded, in part, by apprehensions about the coming of a “New World Order” whereby the federal government will merge with a global government to subjugate all Americans. Believers in these conspiracy theories claim that the federal government will attempt to seize firearms, occupy private land, and invite foreign actors to conquer the United States. For example, Jessica Watkins, a leading member of the Oath Keepers, testified at trial that the group’s greatest fear was a Chinese invasion from Canada.¹³ Such concerns have contributed to violent actions by militia groups, such as the Michigan Militia Corps’ planned attack against a US military base.¹⁴

Given these perceived dangers, it seems logical to many adherents that preparation for self-defence is an existential need. For the modern anti-government movement, these beliefs were seemingly solidified by deadly confrontations with federal authorities in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and Waco, Texas, in 1993. In both cases, US officials used force to assert government authority, leading to prolonged and sometimes fatal standoffs with extremists. Fearing future confrontations with what was perceived to be a hostile and pugnacious federal government, individuals organised the first components of the “patriot” or militia movement in self-defence.¹⁵

Many of the core beliefs of the anti-government far-right are deeply rooted in American history. America’s rebellious origins nurtured a cultural tradition of questioning authority, protecting individual freedoms, and resisting perceived tyranny. A mythological reverence for American patriotism during the Revolutionary War—and to a lesser extent Confederate resistance to the federal government during the US Civil War—inspired followers to stand up for principles of freedom and justice as they saw them. A romanticisation of American history permeates the modern anti-government extremist movement’s rhetoric and iconography, helping to justify and market their cause. For example, the Sovereign Citizens movement is an anti-tax protest movement stylised as a modern successor to the colonists’ Boston Tea Party movement.¹⁶ The Three Percenters derive their name from the myth that only three percent of colonists were willing to resist British rule.¹⁷ The name “Oath Keepers” refers to the oath taken by members of the military and law enforcement to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”¹⁸

The anti-government far-right has expanded significantly over the past thirty years. Local militias, such as the Michigan Militia and the Montana Militia, emerged in the aftermath of Ruby Ridge and Waco and were formed to prepare a collective defence for individuals fearful of violent government overreach. These local organisations integrated existing anti-government ideologies, such as the belief in “common law” propagated by the Sovereign Citizens movement. An estimated 224 patriot groups were active in the United States in 1994. By 1996, this number had more than tripled; more than 850 groups associated with the movement were in operation.¹⁹

However, this rapid expansion soon crumbled under significant pressure from US law enforcement. Timothy McVeigh’s 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City attracted significant attention to the movement and its dangers to the US homeland. McVeigh viewed himself as a martyr in the larger anti-government resistance movement. He saw an act of violence—and in particular a high body count—as necessary to draw attention to the government’s corruption. After the bombing killed 168 people, federal authorities began to take the threat of anti-government extremism more seriously. Domestic law enforcement authorities took greater steps to dismantle and disrupt multiple violent plots inside the United States by the patriot militia movement, leading to its decline in the late 1990s. By 2000, there were fewer than 150 active patriot groups.²⁰

While successful in preventing additional mass-causality violence, law enforcement efforts did not root out anti-government extremism entirely. Elements of the movement continued to operate in the United States and engage in actions—such as organising large-scale meetings and paramilitary training sessions—that fell short of criminal activity. In 2008, the movement gained renewed momentum with the election of Barack Obama. Mike Vanderboegh, a member of the older patriot movement’s Alabama militia, blogged that it was time to get the “band back together” to protest the election and Democratic Party dominance.²¹ His announcement contributed to the formation of two organisations that lead today’s movement: the Three Percenters, which modelled itself on the patriot militia movement, and, shortly after, the Oath Keepers founded by Stewart Rhodes.²²

Over the next few years, anti-government extremism grew as social media networks provided new ways to spread misinformation and far-right conspiracy theories.²³ Donald Trump’s candidacy and later election in 2016 provided ideological reinforcement for the cause.²⁴ The events of 2020 fueled further anti-government mobilisation in the United States, triggered by COVID-19 lockdowns, QAnon conspiracy theories, and concerns about election fraud.²⁵

Organisational Dynamics

Although driven by a common distrust of the federal government, the groups and networks that comprise the modern US anti-government movement vary in terms of how they organise.²⁶ Three types of organisational structures dominate: self-identified followings, local groups and clusters, and national organisations.

The most fluid and transitory organisational structures are those comprised of self-identified followers of the anti-government movement. These individuals are typically self-radicalised and act independently without formal organisational memberships or structures. In recent years, individuals have increasingly used emerging information and communication technologies to learn about and participate in these movements online. Websites such as mymilitia.com, Gab, Telegram, and Parler help individuals spread anti-government ideology and radicalise new followers.²⁷ QAnon, for example, has grown rapidly since its emergence in 2017 after its anti-government conspiracy theories began gaining popularity on well-trafficked websites and forums.²⁸ One Telegram channel dedicated to the New World Order conspiracy and Holocaust denialism gained 90,000 users between February 2021 and October 2021.²⁹ Participants in the January 6 attack also used private Telegram channels to connect “patriots that are going to DC” and coordinate activities between members who had never formally met before.³⁰

When individuals begin to coordinate more systematically with each other, they may form local clusters or groups. This second type of organisational structure is comprised of anti-government extremists who display some degree of cohesion and coordination, often forming small, local paramilitary organisations. These groups have designated leaders, formal members, and potentially even hierarchical organisational structures. Members are drawn from a common social network or community and typically operate in a limited geographic area. Examples include the Idaho Light Foot Militia or the Ohio Defence Force, both of which are relatively small in size and are based in their respective states.³¹

A third type of anti-government extremist organisations in the United States are national groups, such as the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters. In these organisations, a national leadership provides general ideological and strategic direction, but chapters largely remain independent of each other and carry out their own operations. In the Oath Keepers, for example, a national board of directors manages the group’s online presence, while individual Oath Keepers chapters organise and carry out their own activities.³² Sometimes these chapters seek more autonomy, including the ability to build their own reputations independently from the national group brand. For example, after January 6, the North Carolina chapter of the Oath Keepers broke away from the central leadership because it disagreed with the national group’s beliefs in election fraud and participation in the riot.³³

Even among these more structured anti-government groups, organisational identities and ties can be highly fluid. Individual members possess significant autonomy and can belong to multiple movements and organisations at once. A group member can, on their own initiative, choose to attend public rallies, meetings, and training camps with other like-minded individuals who may or may not share their same organisational identity. This individual autonomy facilitates the formation of “loose ties” among followers and unsystematic relationships between groups.

For example, members of the Three Percenters participated in the 2014 standoff between Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and federal authorities. In 2016, some of these individuals returned to support members of the Bundy family in seizing the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Other participants included members of the Oath Keepers, West Mountain Rangers militia, and Southern Nevada Militia, as well as several individuals not associated with any spe-

cific anti-government organisation. More than half of these participants had also taken part in the 2014 Bundy Ranch confrontation.³⁴ In response to the occupation of Malheur, the Idaho and Oregon chapters of the Three Percenters chapter distanced themselves from individual participants that claimed association with the Three Percenters, publicly stating that they “in no way condone nor support these actions.”³⁵ Though condemned by the state chapters, individual members of the Three Percenters chose to participate in the standoff and to independently build ties to other anti-government extremists that shared their beliefs.

Violent and Nonviolent Tactics

A final defining characteristic of the US anti-government movement is its varied set of violent and nonviolent tactics. Most follower actions are relatively nonviolent. For example, some extremists use “paper terrorism”—the filing of frivolous liens, lawsuits, and false financial claims—to overburden the federal government, drain financial resources, and clog court dockets.³⁶ Anti-government groups also regularly participate in legal public events, assemblies, and protests, including school board meetings and political elections. Multiple Oath Keepers members have run for and been elected to state political offices.³⁷ Other actions prepare followers to engage in violence, though they are often geared towards a future potential conflict and not the immediate use of force.³⁸ Many anti-government groups regularly organise and participate in paramilitary training sessions aimed at teaching self-defence and survivalist skills, which may include drills in using firearms, engaging in combat operations, and providing emergency medical aid.³⁹

To the extent that anti-government extremist tactics involve the explicit use of force, they typically revolve around acts of political intimidation or low-level violence targeting ideological opponents.⁴⁰ This includes attacking counter-protesters, brawling, and street-fighting, or maintaining an armed presence at standoffs. Individuals associated with groups like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters are open, even braggadocious, about their presence in public. Members identify themselves by easily recognisable and symbolic attire including battle patches, patriotic flags, and military garb. They also publish details of their operations and meetings online. Often, members openly and legally carry high-powered weaponry. This behaviour usually amounts only to a show of force, though individuals have been injured, arrested, and, during the January 6 attack, killed.⁴¹

In recent years, claims of election fraud and unpopular coronavirus regulations imposed by the government have further motivated members of anti-government groups to seek out—and potentially provoke—conflict with state and federal officials. Anti-government extremist violence has the potential to escalate into a broader and more indiscriminate conflict. Generalised acceptance of the legitimacy of violence can inspire attempts at vigilante justice, such as the 2020 Wolverine Watchmen militia plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Witmer.⁴² Moreover, violent confrontations can inadvertently escalate. For example, heavily armed members of the New Mexico Civil Guard militia engaged in violent clashes with protestors over the removal of a statue in Albuquerque, leading to one protestor being shot by a counter-protestor unaffiliated with the militia.⁴³ In coming years, anti-government violence could become more widespread and deadly both in its current form of street-fighting, paramilitary demonstrations, occupa-

tions of government buildings, standoffs, and mob assaults, and it could lay the groundwork for conspiratorial or clandestine violence and the possibility of mass casualties.⁴⁴

Combating the Anti-Government Extremist Threat

We argue that these characteristics—a strong ideological resolve of resistance, a fluid organisational structure, and a set of provocative but legal tactics—make the US anti-government movement a particularly challenging target for law enforcement. Historically, the United States has not been able to mount a widespread response to terrorism threats posed by its own citizens. During the Cold War, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began to develop some tools to identify, surveil, and deter threats by domestic extremists (e.g. the creation Joint Terrorism Task Forces to facilitate cooperation between local and federal law enforcement agencies). However, much of the FBI's power to investigate and eliminate domestic terrorism was hamstrung by broader public unease concerning the government's ability to collect intelligence on the activities of US citizens.⁴⁵

After 9/11, the US government invested significant resources into developing counter-terrorism tools to address terrorist threats emanating from abroad. The War on Terror became rooted in an ideological narrative which painted counter-terrorism operations and civil liberties restrictions as necessary to protect the American people and their democratic way of life from violent jihadist threats.⁴⁶ Motivated by this narrative, modern US counter-terrorism tools have been crafted specifically to combat an international threat—not a domestic one. For example, US authorities have the power to conduct warrantless surveillance of foreign terrorist suspects but not domestic terrorists. Similarly, Executive Order 13224—which allows the US State Department to designate and freeze the financial assets of foreign individuals and groups seen as terrorist risks—has no parallel for domestic terrorist threats.⁴⁷ The tools developed to address terrorist threats in the post-2001 era adopted a kinetic approach—relying heavily on the use of force—that would not be acceptable for countering domestic threats.⁴⁸ For example, an important component of US counter-terrorism operations since 2001 has been the 'decapitation' of terrorist networks, using targeted military strikes to eliminate high-ranking terrorist leaders of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.⁴⁹ In the domestic context, it would be legally questionable for US law enforcement to use similarly forceful tactics to kill US citizens leading major anti-government organisations or militias.

Moreover, the effectiveness of modern counter-terrorism tools—such as tracking money flows, surveilling communications, or arresting high-value targets—are likely to be less effective against highly decentralised and fluid organisations. By eschewing traditional hierarchical command and control structures, anti-government extremism is highly resilient to leadership changes. Even after national leaders of the Oath Keepers were arrested, local and state chapters persisted. The fluid and ill-defined nature of membership also provides followers plausible deniability and makes it harder to establish deliberate coordination or direction. By following a common ideology, the movement can endure the removal of any one communication platform or critical nodes connecting followers. Dispersed and loose organisational ties thus provide an added form of security.

Social media further exacerbates these challenges. Security encryptions, anonymous communications, and dark web platforms can reduce an extremist's visibility, making it difficult to detect and disrupt violent plots. Efforts to deplatform controversial figures and moderate content can limit the movement's growth, but they may not be sufficient to deal with a set of highly adaptable followers who migrate to alternative technology platforms or generate new accounts to share more toxic and radical content. Further, while private platforms like Meta, TikTok, and Twitter have the authority to circumvent freedom of speech laws to moderate and deplatform hate speech under Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act, these companies have been reluctant to engage.⁵⁰

Additionally, the nonviolent tactics employed by anti-government groups to intimidate, provoke, and threaten violence are often legal and protected under the US Constitution. Freedoms of speech, assembly, and association allow groups to publicly organise, spread extremist ideology and misinformation, and implicitly threaten violence. Protections for Second Amendment rights create additional legal challenges for efforts to prohibit anti-government extremists from securing arms and ammunition.⁵¹ Though laws in all fifty US states prohibit the operation of private militias, these laws are rarely enforced. It is not illegal to be a member of an armed extremist militia, and it is often difficult for law enforcement to establish that militia activities—such as meeting, training, and carrying arms—meet the required legal threshold for criminal charges.⁵²

Even when law enforcement intervenes, efforts are often limited in scope and fail to address the broader, entrenched ideological roots of extremism. Arrests and takedowns may only feed support for anti-government sentiment by reinforcing beliefs about the government's untrustworthiness and vindictiveness. There is a high potential for unanticipated, counterproductive effects. For example, confrontations with the authorities create a risk of violent escalation in subsequent drives for vengeance, such as the repercussions of the Ruby Ridge and Waco stand-offs that motivated the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.⁵³ After participants in the 2016 Malheur occupation were acquitted in court, there were significant concerns that the outcome of the trial could embolden anti-government extremists to target other federal land and government officials in the future.⁵⁴

Efforts at prevention, typically known as countering violent extremism (CVE) may also struggle to succeed. CVE policies developed for jihadist sympathisers often rest on the assumption that individual perpetrators show pre-mobilisation signs that friends and family can recognise and report to the appropriate authorities. This may not be the case in an environment dominated by partisan polarisation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Surrounding communities may be sympathetic to the extremists' underlying beliefs about an overbearing federal government and see little cause for alerting authorities.

There are, however, positive considerations. Decentralisation can be a disadvantage as well as an advantage. By advocating a big tent ideology and encouraging individuals to carry out stochastic acts of violence, or inspired individual acts of terrorism, such networks can attract a wide and unvetted range of followers.⁵⁵ Lack of control from the top can create a moral hazard if followers use violence in shockingly reprehensible ways. For example, the highly destructive

Oklahoma City bombing triggered a profound backlash among militia members who worried that Timothy McVeigh's association with the anti-government movement ruined their credibility and gave outsiders reason to see them as radical extremists.⁵⁶ Unsanctioned or morally transgressive violence can undermine the movement's ability to retain existing members, attract new followers, raise funds, and remain a viable threat.

Another weakness results from the poor cohesion and mistrust among the rank and file. Informers are a constant risk, even in an environment dominated by anonymous social media. Members can come to suspect each other's loyalty and render the movement vulnerable to fragmentation, splintering, and infighting. Law enforcement can infiltrate local or national groups or co-opt existing members to become informants. Notably, former Oath Keepers vice president Greg McWhirter reported on the group's activities to law enforcement for months before group members travelled to the US Capitol to participate in the January 6 attack.⁵⁷ Similarly, in Virginia, a member of the Blue Ridge Hunt Club militia served as an informant for federal authorities and helped them collect the information necessary to arrest group members that planned to carry out violence.⁵⁸ In Michigan, an FBI agent infiltrated the Hutaree Militia to disrupt its plot to target police officers and inspire an anti-government uprising.⁵⁹ Though the anti-government movement has many organisational, ideological, and tactical strengths that make it difficult to undermine, it also possesses serious vulnerabilities that should be the focus of future counter-terrorism approaches.

Directions for Future Work

Far-right anti-government extremism poses a major threat to the stability of the United States. Its turbulent, even chaotic, nature should not disguise the real dangers of further escalation. The US government should be wary of relying on counter-terrorism tools developed to dismantle terrorist threats abroad. Assumptions about what works should be examined critically with an eye to both operational effectiveness and political legitimacy. An informed response should account for the varied, fluid, decentralised, public, and sometimes nonviolent nature of anti-government extremism, as well as the deep-seated and pervasive distrust of federal authority on which it feeds.

Moving forward, US officials should look to the experiences of other democratic states facing similar anti-government threats. In response to the proliferation of violent far-right groups, several democracies have begun developing tools to proscribe these organisations—a process that the United States currently lacks. In December 2016, the United Kingdom took an unprecedented step in banning the far-right domestic political organisation National Action. Since then, the United Kingdom has proscribed four other anti-government extremist groups. Germany banned part of the Sovereign Citizens-inspired Reichsbürger Movement in March 2020. Canada banned the Proud Boys in 2021; New Zealand followed suit in 2022. Have these steps worked?

Results are mixed. An assessment of the United Kingdom's banning of National Action found that it was “undoubtedly successful in its primary aim of dismantling NA organisationally.”⁶⁰

However, the slow-moving process of proscription and banning neither keeps pace with group dynamics nor addresses the ideological roots of the threat.⁶¹ The far-right US group The Base was proscribed by the United Kingdom and New Zealand more than a year after US authorities had effectively dismantled its network operations in Georgia and Michigan. Proscriptions and other litigation efforts may be too late to deal with the highly adaptive nature of these groups. Moreover, these bans are “relatively blunt instruments” if they are not uniformly and consistently enforced across subsidiary organisations.⁶² Many groups exist primarily online and can easily reform, and proscription often encourages members to shift to alternative groups. Members of National Action, for example, joined different groups or reorganised as the System Resistance Network, which has not yet been banned.

The degree to which modern counter-terrorism tools—including proscribing domestic extremist groups—can undermine the growth, activity, and lethality of the anti-government far-right is an important question for both scholars and policy makers. In democratic states, governments that may wish to employ these methods must also balance their desire to uphold crucial freedoms of speech, assembly, and association. Future work should focus on these considerations and explore how democratic states have attempted to counter the anti-government threat posed by their own citizens. The global reach of anti-government extremism creates promising opportunities for scholars to examine the effectiveness of state responses in historical and comparative contexts. Such an analysis could provide new insight into the unique challenges of combatting homegrown extremism in a democratic context.

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