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Right-Wing Extremism in the United States

Claire DeBruin
cmd163@zips.uakron.edu

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Claire M. DeBruin

The University of Akron

Abstract

This paper explores the recent rise in radical right-wing extremist groups in the United States, specifically focusing on what has caused the recent rise in violence and if the rise in groups correlates directly with the rise in radical right-wing extremist attacks. Possible causes of the rise addressed in the following paper include the effect of the President of the United States, the fear of big government, the effects of economic hardships and social changes. All of these causes are discussed in conjunction with one another, demonstrating that all the causes work to create the recent rise in radical right-wing extremist groups and radical right-wing extremist attacks in the United States.

Keywords: radical right-wing extremist groups, radical right-wing extremist attacks

Introduction

The rise of radical right-wing terrorist groups and the subsequent rise of radical right-wing terrorist attacks in the United States have been growing since 2007. Violent attacks performed by right-wing terrorist organizations have moved from an average of fewer than five attacks per year to 31 terrorist attacks in 2017 alone according to Jones (2018). Examples of such attacks include Mitchell Adkins attack on "hardcore liberals" at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, the shooting of a historically black church in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and an anti-Semitic man who shot 11 people in a synagogue in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. According to Piazza (2017), these attacks were motivated by racism, white supremacy, and extreme nationalism, the trademarks of the right-wing extremists.

These groups, however, are not new to America. Since 1970, Domestic right-wing terrorist groups have committed over 500 attacks in the United States. Attacks put on by right-wing terrorist groups have resulted in over half the killings executed by national right-wing groups between 1970 and 2011, according to Piazza (2017). In fact, the deadliest right-wing terrorist attack in United States history occurred in 1995 when Timothy McVeigh bombed an Oklahoma City Federal Building, killing over 150 people and injuring almost 700 others, according to Jones (2018). This attack was orchestrated because McVeigh feared that the United Nations was trying to dismantle the United States government and disarm American citizens.

Radical right-wing terrorists have a variety of intentions and a variety of beliefs. Some overlap, while others do not. This is part of the reason why the radical right-wing extremists have not joined together as one holistic group, but rather maintain their individual branches. It is difficult for them to come together because their ideologies are all slightly different and have a

different focal point. Many attempts have been made to unify the radical right-wing extremists

and make them into a more mainstream, commonly known group that has a large following. This

has been an uphill battle, although it has seen some success in recent years. The more

mainstream the radical right-wing ideologies become, the more attacks will take place, and the

more the groups will rally together, unifying behind one name and one collective ideology.

      Right-wing terrorist groups continue to rise in number, increasing the number of attacks

they carry out. According to the FBI (2017), there has been a 17 percent increase from 2016 to

2017 in hate crime attacks carried out in the United States. Furthermore, since 2014, the

percentage of hate crime attacks in the United States has increased by almost 31 percent. This

increase is alarming and extremely concerning. Radical right-wing extremists utilize online

platforms to reach and radicalize more people. As more people become radicalized, more attacks

will take place, resulting in more deaths in the United States related to radical right-wing

extremists. Radical beliefs continue to become more normalized as more people join the

movement.

Right-Wing Extremism in the United States

There are several reasons why right-wing terrorist groups have risen in number in recent years in the United States. The most relevant variable that traces the rise and fall of radical right-wing extremist violent activity is the political climate, and more specifically, the President of the United States and which party is in control of the United States government. Other variables include more recent trends, such as economic hardship of rural areas, societal changes leaning towards a more liberal society, and fear of big government and the loss of personal rights and liberties. It is not one of these four reasons that have led to the overall increase of radical right-wing extremist groups and their violent activity, but rather a culmination of them all that has been occurring for over fifty years. Events attributed to radical right-wing extremists in recent years demonstrate the reasoning of the rise in radical right-wing extremist organizations and attacks.

The political climate in the United States and which party controls the United States government is greatly affected during each election cycle, with the most considerable amount of polarization occurring during the presidential election years. Radical right-wing groups first tried to legitimize and make their platform of racism, white supremacy, and extreme nationalism during the Bill Clinton Administration, but did not have widespread success according to Neiwert (2017). These self-proclaimed "patriots" became less vocal under the George W. Bush Administration due to the conservativism of the Bush Administration but rose again after Barack Obama was elected to the presidency of the United States in 2008. A liberal, black man serving as the President of the United States goes against one of the primary tenants of the Alt-Right – maintaining the white majority status in the United States.

To continue, extremist groups ban together under their commonalities allowing for "unconventional values [to have] the freedom to develop [and nurture] in an arena unchecked by political correctness" according to Kerodal (2016). Extremist ideologies are considered to be extreme for a reason; they reject mainstream ideas, specifically with regards to being politically correct. Radical right-wing extremists believe that being "politically correct" equates to being censored by the mainstream media. This adds to their fear of big government and losing their liberty to develop personal thoughts and ideologies. When Donald Trump based his campaign around a lack of political correctness and a desire to cleanse the United States government, right-wing groups rallied around him. Their distrust in the United States government stems from the idea that they believe the government is corrupt and out to get them. Donald Trump's desire to "drain the swamp" gave them the notion that the government did not have to be corrupt and the people in power do not have to stay in power forever. This opened the door for the radical right-wing groups to bring new ideas into the mainstream.

A more recent attempt by the radical right to unify radical right-wing extremists across the United States was the "Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. The rally had two intentions, first to unite radical-right wing extremist groups across the United States and second, to protest the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue. Confederate flags were flying high alongside the Nazi insignia. "White lives matter" chants filled the air as radical right-wing extremists, primarily white men, who were angry and protesting. On the other side, a crowd of people protesting the rally gathered in support of racial diversity gathered. What started as a protest, ended in the death of a woman and the injury of at least nineteen others, according to Hartzell (2018). James Alex Fields, of Maumee, Ohio, drove his car straight into a crowd of people who were protesting racism.

James Alex Fields is not unlike many other right-wing extremists. According to *Census Reporter*, Lucas County, Ohio, where the city of Maumee is situated, is 68% white and has a poverty level of almost 18%, which is almost 1.5 times higher than the average poverty rate in the United States. The predominantly white background of the country in conjunction with the high poverty rate fits the demographics of the type of people right-wing extremists target. Right-wing extremists target people who are under economic distress and who typically live in rural areas. These people are more susceptible to manipulation, notably by radical ideas because they already feel marginalized. The radicalization of one man, in this case, led to the death and injury of many others. This goes to show how detrimental hate crimes can be and how quickly things can escalate. The "Unite the Right" rally came about because radical right-wing extremists believed the removal of the General Lee statue was a starting point for the United States to eliminate the white majority in the United States and replace it with a more diverse population.
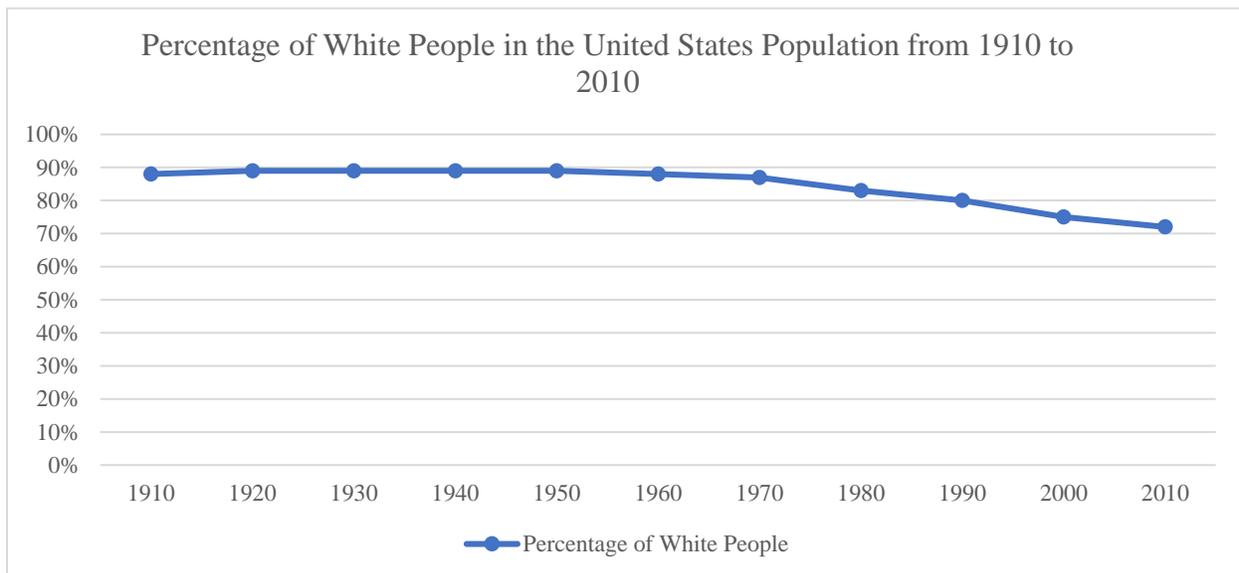
Percentage of White People in the United States Population from 1910 to 2010

Gibson, C. & Jung, K. (2005, February). Historical Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities And Other Urban Places in the United States. https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation /twps0076/twps0076.pdf.

As the chart above demonstrates, there has been a decrease of white people in the United States population since the 1920s, but this has occurred due to immigration and racial integration in the U.S. Although the decrease has been steady, the white population of the United States still has a long way to go before they will lose their majority. This decrease though has been intimidating for the radical right-wing extremists because they fear losing the majority population status in the United States. This is part of the reason why they continue to act out.

President Trump legitimized the actions of the right-wing extremists when he declared that both sides were at fault for the actions, although it was one of the white supremacists who drove a car directly into a group of protestors. He furthermore legitimized their actions when he declared the attack was not about race, although the "Unite the Right' messaging is entirely based around pro-white rhetoric, actions, and teachings. This led to a sense of security with regards to their statements and actions and allowed them to act out and not feel shame for their efforts even if they are based on racism and hatred. President Trump gives them even more security in their statements when he equates political correctness with censorship and then turns around and blames the mainstream media for spreading false information or for being too politically correct. This desire to end political correctness is a cover-up for his real desire to allow for hate speech and for the radical right to have the ability to spread their racist, pro-white messaging. Until recently, in the modern United States (post-1960s, Jim Crow United States), it was unacceptable for a group to be explicitly racist in mainstream political discourse according to Hartzell (2018). It is not just President Trump who has encouraged this behavior, however. The radical right-wing extremists encourage their followers to freely express their thoughts and opinions without being fact-checked. As society progresses and we move to online platforms of expression, like Twitter and Facebook, the opportunity for propagandized statements to be made and spread

quickly increases. Because Twitter and Facebook are easily accessible and can be used by almost anyone without being checked for accuracy or political correctness, the radical right-wing extremists can utilize both impulsivity and incivility in their rhetoric. They masquerade this impulsivity and incivility as being "open expression,' and they applaud its lack of "political correctness.' What it actually does is provoke "anger, resentment, and disdain" in their supporters, according to Gounari (2018). It is precisely the rural, lower class, the white population who falls victim to this type of propaganda, mainly in part to the economic hardships they have been experiencing in recent years.

 In the early 1980s, a farm crisis occurred in the United States, resulting in low prices and a decrease in the value of the United States dollar. It was not just the farms who were struggling financially in the 1980s, but the manufacturing, mining, and forestry industries as well. According to Murdock (1988), the workers in all of these industries were suffering at the hands of the "rapid downturns" the industries were experiencing, leaving the workers even more impoverished and more hopeless than before. Although many farmers and manufacturers did initially receive aid from the U.S. government, rural areas have been receiving "decreasing amounts" of federal aid since the 1980s and have disproportionately suffered the effects of federal budget cuts, according to Murdock (1988), thus in conjunction with the extreme poverty the farmers and manufacturers were already experiencing, they were furthermore being denied federal aid, because the aid was going elsewhere, generally toward female-headed households and minority households. Since the aid they typically received was going elsewhere, rural, white farmers built up resentment toward females and minority groups.

However, it is not only the rural working class population who experiences these sentiments. A large amount of support for radical right-wing extremism comes from the urban

working class population as well according to Vertigans (2007). Furthermore, the number of

manufacturing jobs continued to decrease in the 1970s and 1980s when immigrants from

developing countries came to the United States and took over those jobs. This increased

competition over working-class occupations has significantly impacted white, working-class

persons because it is more difficult for them to get jobs and keep their families economically

afloat, according to Vertigas (2007).

Recent social changes have also greatly affected radical right-wing extremists. The white,

working-class population is not only suffering economically; however, they also feel

marginalized by the more diverse minority population. The white, working-class population

experiences sentiments of "preferential treatment" toward minority groups, according to Vertigas

(2007). An example of such feelings comes from a member of the Aryan Nations, Bob Martin.

He shared his experiences of feeling like whites were being unfairly treated and that he was

being "made [into a] submissive or subject to the majority [blacks]," according to Vertigas

(2007). It is clear he was feeling significant resentment towards the black population of his city.

Further, according to Vertigas (2007), this resentment is a trend that continues to grow as the

United States grows more diverse in population and the white, working-class population

experiences more "perceived cultural, economic, and political threats" resulting in feelings of

alienation.

Analysis

The President of the United States and the party who is in control of politics in the United

States dramatically affects the radical right-wing extremist groups. According to the Southern

Poverty Law Center (SPLC), in 2008, the SPLC tracked 926 hate groups across the United

States, that number increased to 932 in 2009 after Obama took the presidency. That may not

seem like a significant change, but the trend does increase slightly. The line continues to

increase, jumping to 1002 hate groups in 2010 and 1018 hate groups in 2011. From the

beginning of 2001, when George W. Bush took office, to 2009, when Barack Obama took office,

the number of hate groups in the United States increased from 667 hate groups to 932 hate

groups. That is a 39.7% increase, clearly demonstrating the correlation between the President of

the United States and the number of hate groups.

During the George W. Bush presidency, right-wing extremists did not act out as

frequently because President Bush did not significantly oppose any of their policies or actions,

nor did the political climate go against their main ideologies. Especially after the terrorist attacks

of September 11, 2001, nationalism and patriotism were incredibly high in the United States.

Nationalism and patriotism are two of the primary tenants of the radical right-wing extremists;

therefore, it was easy for them to fly under the radar. Radical right-wing extremists did not seem

so extreme when the entire United States population was experiencing fear from foreign

terrorists. Things changed in 2008 when Barack Obama was elected to the presidency, and this is

the first time that there is a significant spike in radical right-wing extremist groups, although they

had been slowly gaining status from 2001 to 2008.

The Obama Administration greatly affected the right-wing extremist groups because of

his political ideology. As a more liberal president, radical right-wing extremists believed that

Barack Obama represented a larger government that would take more from the people. President

Obama introduced programs such as the Affordable Care Act, which increased medical care for

American citizens across the United States and that was met with significant backlash from

people who believe in smaller government. Right-wing extremists take issue with the expansion

of government because they believe that big government infringes upon individual liberties

according to Piazza (2017). According to Kerodal (2016), they furthermore reject the legitimacy

of the government because of their fear of losing personal liberties and being manipulated by the

government. Their fear of government and even anti-government beliefs in some cases extend to

the rejection of the tax system and anti-gun control laws. Kerodal (2016) continues, adding that

antigovernmental beliefs are one of the most widespread beliefs of right-wing extremists due to

the feelings of marginalization and underrepresentation in the government.

The number of radical right-wing groups continued to rise until 2014 when the

Republicans took control of the United States House of Representatives and rolled back some of

the more liberal policies set forth by President Obama. This more conservative takeover of the

government did not satisfy them for long. Many right-wing extremists still felt they were being

overlooked by the government and were tired of how things were running in the United States

government. The radical right-wing extremists felt they did not have a voice in government, nor

were they accurately being represented, so they rejected the system according to Piazza (2017).

When President Trump ran for office, campaigning for the so-called "forgotten white man" and

the rejection of "political correctness," this group felt like they finally were going to regain their

voice and the prestige in government they had previously held. This is one of the main reasons

why the right-wing extremists rallied behind the Trump campaign. Political representation is

incredibly important which is why the President of the United States and controlling party matters.

Furthermore, the trend of hate groups in the United States continued to increase from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration, reaching 954 in 2017, immediately following the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States. This is an even more substantial increase in hate groups than the Bush Administration to the Obama Administration, demonstrating how influential President Trump has been on radical right-wing hate groups. This is significant because typically, radical right-wing extremist groups pull back under a more conservative president because they feel more represented. The opposite occurred with Donald Trump.

The election of Donald Trump is considered to be a victory for white supremacy, thereby making the radical right-wing groups feel legitimized. During the election, Trump campaigned that "America is fundamentally a white man's country" and while campaigning, he utilized rhetoric that supported white supremacy and racism according to Sanchez (2018). Collin Liddell, a well-known white supremacist, used the *Alternative Right* website to say, "[w]ith the election of Trump, America now has a chance – just a chance, mind you – of maintaining its cohesion (*yes, that is code for "remaining a mainly White and civilized country*) which clearly demonstrates the radical right's belief that President Trump is a champion of their cause. The Trump Administration brings about a "mix of racism and white supremacy, corporatism, and militarization" to the United States through their policies and the legislation they promote, resulting in the emboldened actions of the right-wing radicals, according to Gounari (2018).

The graph below demonstrates the trendline of the number of hate groups in the U.S. from 2001 to 2018 and the influence of the President of the United States and controlling party.
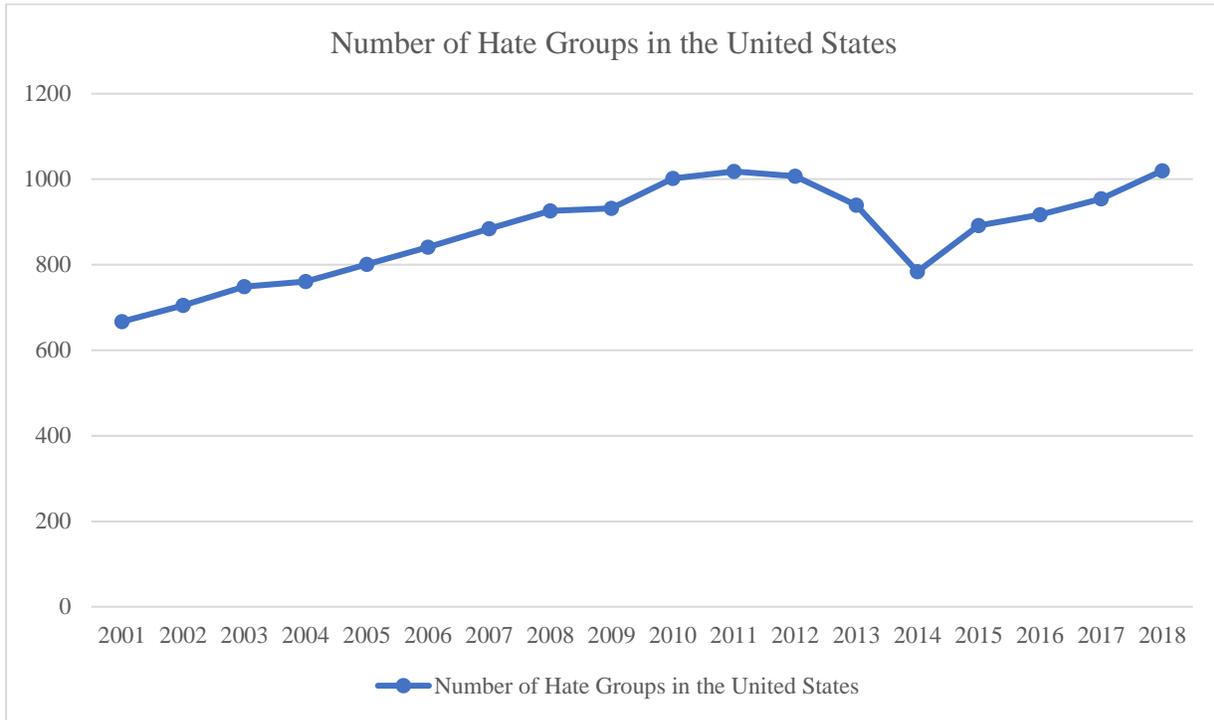
Available from Southern Poverty Law Center. (2001-2018). Hate Map. Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map.

Additionally, "'racist incidents' and "hate crimes' have risen dramatically since Trump launched his presidential campaign and spiked significantly since his election" according to Hartzell (2018) which demonstrates the aforementioned idea that President Trump's rhetoric and policies have normalized and emboldened the radical right-wing's actions. The United States is open for racist attacks, whether verbal or physical, under the Trump Administration. Every time President Trump chooses not to condemn white supremacy or uses racist appeals to gain support, he enables the radical right in their actions and gives them more legitimacy.

As demonstrated in the chart below, the number of criminal incidents and related offenses motivated by bias toward race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender,

and gender disability, has been on a trend upward since President Trump's campaign for office

and election to office according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2017).

Number of criminal incidents and related offenses motivated by bias toward race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender, and gender identity.
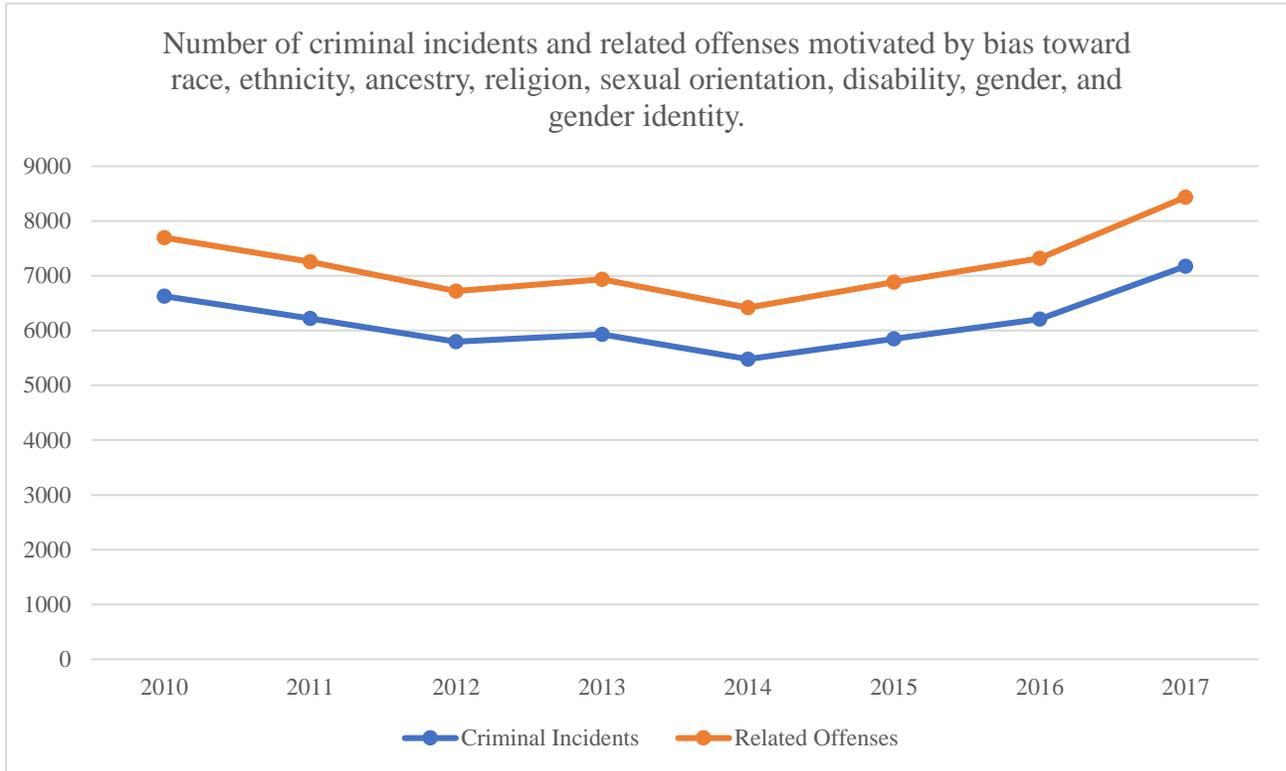
Available from Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2010-2017). Hate Crime Statistics. Retrieved from https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-releases-2017-hate-crime-statistics.

The number of hate groups in the United States and the number of criminal incidents and related offenses motivated by bias toward race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender, and gender disability directly correspond to one another. Not surprisingly, when there are more radical right-wing extremist groups, there will be more radical right-wing extremist attacks carried out.

However, the President of the United States and the governing party of the United States Government are not the only causes of radical right-wing extremist groups or their actions. The

economic hardships that the blue-collar, middle class, rural, white population have been

experiencing have also caused an increase in support for radicalized right-wing extremists. Since

the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, there has been a significant amount of economic downturn in rural

areas with less federal aid coming in, making it increasingly difficult for this population to

support themselves and keep themselves above the poverty line.

Radical right-wing ideas that minorities are to blame for the economic misfortune of the

blue-collar, middle class, rural, white population are easy to believe when that group is already

feeling marginalized by minorities and suffering economically. It is easy for a group of people to

become radicalized when they are already in poverty and feeling hopeless. In fact, according to

Piazza (2017), there is a direct correlation between industrial and farm employment losses and

the rise of patriot, militia, and white supremacist groups because the previously employed

industrial and farm workers feel marginalized by the government and want vengeance. In most

cases, the farmers and industrial workers are not the ones who come up with the extremist

ideologies, but rather, are easily manipulated by the radical right-wing extremists because the

right-wing extremists validate their feelings of anger, fear, and hopelessness. The right-wing

extremists encourage the farmers and industrial workers to blame racial minorities for their

economic misfortune and act out against them. The hate crimes enacted by right-wing extremists

are usually vengeful and are aimed against racial and ideological enemies according to Piazza

(2017).

 These vengeful feelings are not grown overnight. They need a place to foster and develop, and

one of the most utilized places are online platforms. Examples of such websites include *Breitbart*

and *Alternative Right*. Radical right-wing extremists have propagandized websites that provide

their supporters or people who are interested in becoming supporters a safe place to gather and

grow their racist viewpoints. These websites are also used to win over mainstream conservatives, encouraging them to become radicalized and join the movement. Many rural people who are struggling economically visit these websites as mainstream conservatives, then rally behind the more radicalized ideologies because these websites validate their anger, frustration, and fear. "Common-sense" statements are also frequently used to justify radical beliefs and make them seem more credible and relatable, thereby encouraging more members to join the radicalized group.

There are several well-known right-wing extremists who support this "common-sense" ideology, and one of the most well known in Dr. Paul Gottfried, a self-identified "paleoconservative" who has been a large proponent of radical right-wing extremist ideology, specifically through "common-sense" statements and pseudoscience. According to Hartzell (2018), "paleoconservatives are a far-right reactionary group who distance themselves from mainstream Republicans and conservatives most clearly through their opposition to interventionism and their support for nationalism." Dr. Gottfried is an Ivy-League-educated professor, and because of his status as an intelligent professor, he constructs his narratives using pseudoscience and "reasonable" arguments that are easy to understand and provoke people to agree with him. This is one of the reasons why the rural, less educated population is manipulated so easily. Radical right-wing extremists make their arguments easy to understand and push people to agree with them using a significant amount of pseudoscience and fallacy.
 Dr. Gottfried furthermore tries to create an extreme division between whites and all other races. He uses the argument of "sociobiology" to declare that due to "[biological] predisposition white people are intellectually and culturally superior" according to Hartzell (2018). It is not just Dr. Gottfried who has these beliefs about white supremacy, however. According to the Southern

Law and Poverty Center, the number of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) groups nearly doubled from 2014-

2016. The KKK is one of America's oldest and most violent hate groups and has committed

many horrible acts against minority groups in the United States. Mark Potok, who wrote the

Southern Law and Poverty Center article about the KKK, stated, '"Trump's run for office

electrified the radical right, which saw him as a champion of the idea that America is

fundamentally a white man's country,'" according to Sanchez (2018). The election of Donald

Trump and his pro-white rhetoric made them feel safer and gave them back their power by

playing on the rage and vengefulness they have been feeling towards minority groups. According

to Kellner (2018), due to this rhetoric, Trump was declared the "People's Choice" and the "voice

of the forgotten man" when in actuality, he is the "white people's choice" and the "voice of the

white man." Thus, the social climate and economic status of the country dramatically affects the

number of radical right-wing extremist groups and their violent attacks in the United States.

The tension of the social climate in the United States has increased in the past several

years as radical right-wing extremist groups grow in number and their attacks become more

frequent. In 2015, Dylann Roof, a white supremacist, opened fire on the Emanuel African

Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, according to Momodu (2017).

Eyewitnesses say, "he says that he has "to do it' because black 'people' rape our women' and are

"taking over our country ' "before he started shooting, according to Cohen of the Southern

Poverty Law Center (2015). The so-called rationale of this attack is similar to many others,

demonstrating a fear of racial diversity in the United States.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of radical right-wing extremist groups and violence in the United States in the recent years can be attributed to a number of factors, including, but not limited to the President of the United States and which party is in control of the United States government, a fear of big government, economic struggles of the working class, and rejection of social changes and developments in the United States. The President of the United States and which party is in control of the United States government significantly affects the prominence of radical right-wing extremist groups and their violent actions because one of the main issues the right-wing extremists have with the U.S. government is the fear of losing their personal liberties. Under the Bush Administration, the radical right-wing groups were relatively unseen, partially due to the conservative nature of the Bush Administration, and partially due to the nationalism and patriotism of the United States after the foreign terrorist attacks that took place on 9/11. They grew in popularity under the Obama Administration because they believed President Obama represented big government and that he would decrease the number of personal liberties they would have. The groups continued to grow in number when President Trump was elected to office because he frequently legitimizes the actions of radical right-wing extremists through his rhetoric.

Furthermore, the economic hardships that the white, working-class have been experiencing since the 1970s and 1980s have affected the rise in right-wing extremist groups because as these groups become more impoverished, they seek a group to blame for their struggles and to put their frustration on. The radical right-wing extremist groups encourage this frustrated, impoverished group to blame minorities for their economic struggles, citing the marginalization of white people and the preferential treatment of minority groups. This blame of minority groups

can also be attributed to the social changes in the United States. As the United States becomes

increasingly diverse, the number of white people in the U.S. decreases. This makes the radical

right-wing extremist groups feel like they will continue to be marginalized and pushed aside by

the government and by social norms, furthermore, making them disadvantaged in society.

All of these factors have contributed to the rise of radical right-wing extremist groups and

their violence. As these groups have grown, their ideologies have become more mainstream, and

their number of supporters have grown. This has resulted in more groups and more violent

attacks. Should this hate, racism, and fear continue unchecked, as it has in the past fifty years,

radical right-wing extremist groups will continue to grow in popularity, and their extremist

ideologies may not seem so extreme in the future. Their ideologies could even become wholly

normalized and accepted in mainstream politics, and their violence will increase, and the United

States will fall subject to white supremacy and racial discrimination on a large scale.

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