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<u>**Final Project Proposal**</u>
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<u>**Previous Work / Background**</u>

Political violence is a form of violence that is perpetuated by the achievement of political goals. While this can happen between states (i.e., war), we focus on the political violence between non-state actors and states (i.e., *coup d'etats*, riots) or between civilians themselves. For an example of a case of political violence, the January 6th attack was, as widely regarded, an attempted *coup d'état* on the United States Capitol (the state). The event was instigated by several thousand armed pro-Trump insurrectionists (non-state actors) with the intent to disrupt a session of Congress certifying Biden as the winner of the 2020 election. The U.S. has seen an uptick in cases of political violence in recent years. In 2022, "There were more than 9,600 recorded threats against members of Congress… a jump of nearly tenfold from 2016" (Bergengruen 2022).

Researching such cases finds that sentencing for what are broadly considered as "political violence" incidents encompasses a broad range of terminology, oftentimes not including politics-specific language in charges and indictments. For example, the Normandale Park shooting of February 2022 that left one dead and several injured is widely regarded as a politically motivated act of violence. The crime occurred at a political rally, and the perpetrator "had been radicalized in recent years, professing his hatred for Antifa, Black Lives Matter and 'those damn commies'" (Medina 2023). However, his court sentencing does not include charges for political violence or related language.

Examples like this prove the need for thorough collection and analysis of data related to politically motivated crime. One example of such a database is NPR's <u>Jan. 6 Capitol riot cases database</u>, which monitors and reports the charges and case updates of people charged for their involvement in the 2021 attack on the Capitol. Another project in this space is the *Chicago Project on Security and Threats'* "American Political Violence" project, which conducts surveys and reports on "scope and drivers of support for domestic political violence from the right and left in contemporary America" (CPOST 2024). These, as well as the data we will use for our project (as detailed below), collect crucial data to answer questions about trends and motivations behind political violence that have the potential to inform decision making on how to prevent it.

The motivations behind political violence can vary. For instance, the study "Political Geography of the January 6 Insurrectionists" examines the local conditions that contributed to the participation in the January 6 insurrection. Key findings indicate that many individuals were driven by concerns over the decline in white population (13% decline between 2010 and 2020) amid growing minority populations, especially in counties with representatives who objected to certifying the 2020 election. This factor's impact was three times greater than that of manufacturing decline (38% decline over the past 50 years). Furthermore, insurrectionist participation was lower in counties that heavily supported Donald Trump, suggesting that white status anxiety, rather than economic frustrations alone, may drive violent political actions, especially in areas undergoing demographic changes.

Reoffenders may have levels of involvement in political violence compared to first-time offenders, potentially affecting the sentence they receive. "Prison and Violent Political

Extremism in the United States" investigates the relationship between imprisonment and subsequent violent extremism. The study finds that both imprisonment and radicalization within prison significantly increases the likelihood of post-prison violent extremism. Imprisonment raises the risk of future violent extremism by 77-78%, while those radicalized in prison are 171-187% more likely to engage in violence post-release than those radicalized elsewhere. This prison-based radicalization, known as "prisonization", involves inmates adopting violent attitudes to fit into prison culture. The prison environment can also intensify involvement in political violence due to its concentration of stressors and criminogenic influences.

Finally, racial disparities are a major factor behind differences in arrest rates, sentencing, and incarceration trends. Of the 2.3 million adults in U.S. prisons, a significant portion are uneducated African American men. In 2020, African American adults were imprisoned at five times the rate of White adults. They were also incarcerated at higher rates than other racial groups for both misdemeanors and felonies, and typically served the longest sentences for felony offenses (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2023).

Motivation

Our group is investigating the factors that predict sentencing length in political violence cases to better understand how justice is administered in these situations. Sentencing disparities have long been a concern in the criminal justice system, and political violence is a complex area where fairness, justice, and transparency must be investigated. Factors such as race, gender, political affiliation, and ideological affiliation, may play a specific role in sentencing outcomes. By identifying these patterns, we aim to shed light on how sentencing in political violence cases is handled compared to other criminal cases.

Our goal is to create predictive models to identify the most significant factors that influence sentencing outcomes. For example, we are particularly interested in whether ideological or political affiliations have a bigger impact on sentencing length. This research is especially relevant as politically motivated violence remains a central issue in our country, particularly as we near another election cycle. There is "no official tally of how many Americans die each year from political violence" and this type of violence "isn't tracked in federal or local crime data" (Parker & Eisler 2023). Given the lack of consistent data on political violence, we hope our project can address gaps in tracking and predicting sentencing trends.

Our data comes from The Prosecution Project (tPP), a non-profit organization tracking political violence cases. One of our group members, Salley, volunteers with tPP, where she leads the fulfillment of data requests and manages the project's datasets. She has not conducted personal analysis with this data before, so this project allows her to dive deeper into tPP's data to contribute to our understanding of how political violence is prosecuted. Ultimately, our group aims to provide evidence-based insights into how political violence cases are handled and help predict patterns in sentencing. We hope to build reliable predictive models that can help inform academic discussions and guide future research projects or legal processes. By analyzing both highly visible cases and those with less visibility, we hope to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on sentencing in political violence cases, especially during a time when political unrest and violence remain pressing concerns in our current political landscape and potentially in the future.

Question

What background factors predict the sentencing length of individuals charged with political violence crimes in the US from 1990 through 2024?

We chose this question to capture how sentencing patterns have evolved over the past three decades, reflecting shifts and events in political, social, and legal contexts. Our current question is more general, because we want to allow room for exploration before defining our predictor variables and subquestions. By spanning all available years of data from our data source, we aim to account for the complexity and diversity of political violence cases, ranging from domestic terrorism to protest-related offenses. Our goal is to identify whether factors such as race, gender, political affiliation, and criminal methods play a role in sentencing disparities, contributing to larger discussions on fairness and biases in our criminal justice system. We hope our question will enable analysis that can inform academic research and policy decisions.

Data Description

Our data is coming from *the Prosecution Project* (tPP, https://theprosecutionproject.org), an open-source research platform "tracking and analyzing felony criminal cases involving political violence in the U.S. since 1990." Cases from tPP are collected from primary sources ("court documents, governmental reports and releases") and "cross-referenced with a series of…other sources." The data we are using from the organization includes both completed and pending cases, but does not include any incomplete cases.

Our data includes 48 columns and about 8,000 rows. Columns we hope to investigate further as predictors of sentencing length include Physical target, Ideological target, Ideological affiliation, Group affiliation, Criminal method, Plea, Age, Gender, Racial/ethnic group, Religion, Veteran status, and Citizenship status. While we will investigate each column individually, we will also utilize interaction terms between some columns as we continue our analysis. We want to utilize a diverse set of variables to allow for a more thorough analysis of both demographic and behavioral factors that can impact sentencing outcomes.

Analysis

We will begin our investigation by applying foundational models, such as *K-Nearest Neighbors* and *multiple regression*, to explore how background factors predict sentencing length in political violence cases between 1990 and 2024. Starting off with a few key variables, such as *race*, *political affiliation*, and *ideological affiliation*, we aim to identify initial trends and correlations in sentencing disparities. As we progress through the course and learn about new algorithms and models, we will expand both the number of variables and the complexity of our models. For example, we will integrate techniques such as *decision trees* and *ensemble methods* to improve predictive accuracy beyond our initial models. And towards the end of the course, we hope to explore *deep learning techniques*, which could help identify more complex patterns and interactions across a larger number of variables. We also want to look over amendments made during the time period to analyze if federal laws impacted sentencing for political crimes. This iterative approach will allow us to develop a deeper understanding of how individual factors contribute to sentencing decisions over time.

Timeline / Plan

Week	Plan & Responsibilities (Whole Group)
3	- Coming up with a research question - **Complete and submit project proposal**
4	- Gather data, load and clean dataset from tPP - Perform exploratory and descriptive analysis of our dataset through calculations and visualizations to understand trends, outliers, and key variables - Identify potential variables of interest
5	- Create data visualizations visualize trends - Start feature engineering for models - Build simple models using explanatory variables of interest, plot the results - **Complete and Submit Preliminary Analysis Assignment**
6	- Examine the outputs from the simple model, test different simple models - Examine all of the models, choose a model and expand it
7	- Build off the preliminary data analysis - Evaluate chosen model and tune to improve prediction - **Complete and Submit In-Depth Analysis Assignment**
8	- Use evaluation metrics on the model - Create visualizations for evaluations if needed - Interpret the results and prepare final analysis for the report
9	Writing final report, preparing slides and content for presentation
10	**Submitting final report, practices runs for final presentation**

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