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The Banality of Extremism: The Role of Group Dynamics and Communication of Norms in Polarization on January 6

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Many of the individuals charged in the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol did not have ties to far-right extremist groups, leading some pundits and researchers to speculate that extremism has become mainstream and much more common in the current political environment. In this article, we discuss events before and during January 6 that affected extremism and pushed people toward polarization. Specifically, we discuss the role of the media, especially social media, in developing like-minded content sharing and polarizing, extremist group norms. The role of groups to drive people toward protest is discussed within research on social movements. The role of identity and acceptability of prejudice toward outgroup political members and how this identity fed into increasing extremist rhetoric are also discussed. Then, we discuss conditions of the day of January 6, including establishment of norms through rhetoric and the social proof of extremist action, and also, the easy exit of those who could leave an increasingly escalating situation. Finally, we address the implications for the current political climate, including the potential for increased violence and extremism.

Highlights and Implications

- This article seeks to answer the question: What drove people normally not associated with far-right extremists to take part in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol?
- This article highlights the role of social media in creating homogeneous networks, where ideologically like-minded individuals shared emotions, concerns, and grievances.
- The role of identity and affective polarization in driving outgroup animosity and affectively polarizing rhetoric is discussed.
- Events during January 6 that contributed to violence include polarizing rhetoric, easy exit for dissenters, escalating social proof, and development of more extreme norms.
- Implications of increasing political violence are discussed, as the events of January 6 have further polarized the public in the United States.

Keywords: polarization, information cascades, social proof, group norms, selective exposure

A closer look at the people suspected of taking part in the Capitol riot suggests a different and potentially far more dangerous problem: 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

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> extremists in an attempt to overturn a presidential election. (Pape & Ruby, 2021)

> "We're seeing a lot of folks [charged] who look like pretty normal people ... They tend to be older individuals, that were married, with families, that had jobs. These are not hardcore extremists."—Michael Jensen, a senior researcher, who specializes in radicalization at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. (as quoted by Beckett, 2021)

These above two quotes illustrate that many people participating in the January 6 Capitol attack appeared different from far-right extremists that journalists and researchers had previously focused upon. They appeared ordinary, banal, and normal. A year after the attack, 79% of those arrested had no explicit connection to extremist groups (Greenblatt, 2022), and as journalist Jonathan Greenblatt (2022) stated, "This suggests that a significant number of seemingly ordinary Americans decided that mob violence was an appropriate response to the election results." (p. 1). Given this characterization, pundits, journalists, and researchers have been asking: What drove people normally not associated with far-right extremists to take part in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol? In this article, we examine political polarization in groups and the development of group norms, both before January 6 and during the event. Political polarization has often been examined through the lens of people self-selecting into partisan media bubbles, and we briefly cover that research here as a background variable contributing to homogeneity. However, with social media, the role of groups and networks in developing and enforcing norms, providing a source of social comparison, and encouraging action may have played an outsized role in persuading people to such extreme behavior prior to January 6. On the day itself, conditions for polarization, such as easy exit from the scene, extreme rhetoric from former President Trump, group norms, and informational cascades may have then facilitated the extreme behavior. First, we examine the conditions of polarization before January 6.

Conditions for Polarization Before January 6

Research on extremity in groups has highlighted the conditions that lead to polarization (Sunstein, 2009). These include homogeneity of opinions among members, social comparison to more extreme members, easy exit for dissenters, and social categorization of like-minded members and identification. First, we highlight the role of media in creating conditions in which people have homogeneous opinions through informational influence and exposure to arguments supporting one position. Second, due to the unique affordances of social media, we discuss how social media provides a point of social comparison and creates group norms. Further, the ease of exit from social media creates conditions in which people can isolate themselves from dissent. Finally, through identity and social categorization, outgroup political members are perceived increasingly as negative, and even immoral and evil, justifying extreme action.

The Role of Media

To understand self-selection into partisan media bubbles, an important precursor to homogeneity of opinions and polarization, we need to focus on *selective exposure*. The general premise is that people seek to maintain a consistent attitude toward an object or behave in a way that reflects their underlying attitudes and beliefs (Festinger, 1957). As a result, people tend to look for information that supports their opinions, while avoiding information that challenges their beliefs (Klapper, 1960). Selective exposure is frequently blamed for the polarization of the American electorate, and indeed, numerous studies have shown evidence that people engage in selective exposure, especially in a political context (Atkin, 1971; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011; Stroud, 2008, 2010). However, other research suggests that most individuals maintain ideologically neutral news diets (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman et al., 2016; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). Flaxman et al. (2016), for example, examined the online reading habits of 50,000 internet users and found that the vast majority frequented outlets with relatively little political slant or read content from both political perspectives. Although some controversy remains regarding the extent to which the overall population engages in selective exposure concerning political issues, scholars hardly disagree that "partisans" frequently do engage in selective exposure and consume information in line with their political beliefs. Then, how does selective exposure affect polarization, particularly for partisans?

Before cable TV and the internet, news channels tended to give (ideologically) balanced

attention to political entities, and there was little choice in the media environment (see Prior, 2007, for more discussion). With cable TV and the internet, the media environment has shifted from a low-choice environment to a high-choice one, within which people enjoy greater and broader choice of content (Prior, 2007). People do not need to turn to balanced reporting and can easily select whichever news source aligns with their political viewpoints (Stroud, 2008, 2010). When consistently exposed to information supporting one side of an issue, people tend to polarize (Hinsz & Davis, 1984; Vinokur & Burstein, 1974). In other words, the modern high-choice media environment allows media users to engage in partisan selective exposure more easily than ever before. Such tendencies may amplify within the social media environment (Sunstein, 2018).

Social Media

Social media allows users to form partisan information silos where they mainly consume attitude-congruent political news and opinions (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018). Users can follow and get information from accounts that align with their political opinions. They also get exposed to attitude-congruent political information in the form of social recommendations (Anspach, 2017), as people tend to connect to others who share similar political views on social media (Bakshy et al., 2015). In addition, as users engage with news suggested on their feeds/timelines, social media algorithms grasp their preferences to share even more personalized news content (Cheney-Lippold, 2018; Lee et al., 2021).

Of importance, social media not only encourages people to selectively follow and consume *content/information* aligning with their beliefs (e.g., Republicans following President Trump's Twitter account), but also enables them to selectively network with politically like-minded people who circulate like-minded information and share feelings, concerns, and dissents (Sunstein, 2018; Yardi & Boyd, 2010). This networking aspect of social media adds another layer encouraging polarization by promoting social comparison toward more extreme members of one's network and by reinforcing reputational concerns that can lead to group polarization (Buunk et al., 2007; Isenberg, 1986; Sunstein, 2009). Through comparing their opinions to similar others of their social media group, members may polarize in the direction of the norm (Myers, 1978). Participants seek belonging and approval from their social media group, and the group may have a low tolerance for dissent, especially as ingroup members may paint the political outgroup in moralistic terms (i.e., "evil," "immoral"), and those who may disagree with extreme content can simply log off or may be blocked if they engage in dissent. This creates conditions where it is easy to sideline dissenting group members that could moderate extreme viewpoints (Sunstein, 2009). Similar to research on polarization and terrorism on social media, if the identified enemy is evil, then dissent and compromise are not tolerated, and people accept polarized group norms to seek ingroup approval (Sageman, 2008). This role of networking is especially true for Twitter (compared to Facebook or Instagram), where people are likely to build ties with people with similar viewpoints (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Overall, users are unlikely to be exposed to cross-cutting viewpoints on social media (Takikawa & Nagayoshi, 2017), while various forms of exposure to compatible information—even including fake news against the opposite group—shared between like-minded people may amplify one's negative perception of political outgroups (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018) and social comparison processes can push more polarized and extreme viewpoints. Further, when conspiracy theories support the group's ideology or bolster the ingroup, the theories can gain traction within a group, while being perceived as fake by outsiders (Sunstein, 2009).

The aforementioned mechanisms help explain why people are becoming politically more extreme. However, holding an extreme political attitude per se does not necessarily push people to engage in protests because protest engagement involves a time and money cost and entails risks and a high level of commitment. Given the large cost of protest participation, social movement scholars have long tried to explain what actually encourages people to engage in protests. A classic study by Klandermans and Oegema (1987), who examined the process of mobilization, suggests that once people agree with the protesters' goals the most determining factor of participation in protests is whether one is asked to participate by their friends or family members. Here, the role of one's group and network becomes crucial (Snow et al., 1983). Scholars suggest that social media—compared to mass media—is very efficient in

such a recruitment process. For instance, people can use social media to express their interests in attending an event and then encourage their network to participate (Boulianne et al., 2020). Through social media, users can also create and join groups and webpages based on common interests (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Jost et al., 2018; Valenzuela, 2013). People can not only exchange protest-related information on these groups (Harlow & Johnson, 2011; Lee, 2018) but also highlight norms for participation as well as encourage and persuade others to participate, which serves as a driving force for protest participation (Eltantawy &Wiest, 2011; for more details about the mechanisms driving protest participation, see Lee, 2020).

To summarize, social media facilitates protest participation by (a) consistently exposing users to like-minded political information/news (both through active search and incidental exposure through algorithms) that would breed and strengthen their negative attitude toward the status-quo through exposure to more arguments; (b) maximizing one's network's effect, where ideologically like-minded individuals can not only share protest-related information and strategies but also emotions, concerns, and grievances (which often precede protest participation); and (c) producing a need for approval and belonging to and social comparison with like-minded ingroup members that may push a participant toward more extremity and even action. These have been widely covered in the context of a democratic movement, but they could also be applied to extremist movements such as the Capitol attack on January 6.

We apply aforementioned theories/mechanisms to explain the January 6 Capitol attack. First, protesters had likely been exposed to news/information aligning with the theme of a fraudulent election, notably emerging from then President Trump's tweets. Constant exposure to such information from like-minded networks would reinforce their beliefs that the 2020 election was stolen and create a false estimation of social proof in their information environment (e.g., many people think this election is a fraud), as there would have been few opportunities for them to be exposed to opposite opinions/contents on social media, and if exposed, they may distrust information from outgroup sources. Further, people may compare themselves to those in their networks holding even more extreme beliefs along the same lines. This would set up a polarized attitude.

Second, the network effect seemingly played an important role in the Capitol attack. Nearly a third of the people charged were part of "organized clusters" composed of family members or friends who had planned to partake in the protest together (The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021). As many of those attending came from counties where Biden won (Pape & Ruby, 2021), the role of friendship and family groups helps explain their polarization in an otherwise more politically diverse population. These statistics confirm the importance of a network in protest participation, especially when it comes to "high-risk" movements (McAdam, 1986). Of course, this does not mean these people had been exclusively mobilized through social media. But social media—by providing platforms to easily interact, network, and join groups—undeniably played an important role in mobilizing/drawing people to engage in such an extremist movement. The majority of those charged in the attack did not have a known connection to a far-right extremist group, and this suggests how much far-right and extremist ideologies have moved toward the mainstream through outlets such as social media (The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021). About half of those charged in the Capitol attack had their own social media posts used against them as evidence (The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021). The fact that participants posted themselves on social media participating in the attack, without consideration of the consequences, suggests just how embedded they were in the norms of their network and isolated from dissent, which we will address when discussing the day of January 6.

In his book, *Going to Extremes*, Cass Sunstein (2009) outlines conditions for attitude polarization in groups. The first two, isolation and strong ingroup identity, are preconditions of the Capitol attack in which participants engaged in media silos upon which their identities depended, especially in social media contexts where participants engaged with each other and valued each other's approval. Next, we discuss political identity and its role in polarization.

Affective Polarization and Identity

Extensive research has documented the growth of affective polarization in recent years, defined as animus toward opposing political groups even

in the absence of policy differences (Garrett et al., 2014; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Levendusky, 2018). Since the 1980s, researchers have measured Americans' attitudes toward outgroup partisans using tools such as the feeling thermometer, which asks individuals to rate their opinion of the outgroup on a scale from 0 to 100 (0–49 indicate very cold or cold feelings and 51–100 indicate warm or very warm). In the 1980s, less than 40% of respondents from either party gave outparty scores below 50, on average. By 2019, those numbers had risen drastically, with 83% of Republicans and 79% of Democrats providing scores less than 50 (Pew Research Center, 2019). Such findings have replicated with other methods; in sum, Americans increasingly dislike members of the opposing political group (see Iyengar et al., 2012), leading to a growing unwillingness to interact with one another (Gift & Gift, 2015; Huber & Malhotra, 2016; Shafranek, 2021).

Affective polarization understands polarization less as an ideological stance and more as a form of prejudice, allowing us to examine the role that group identity plays in furthering these attitudes and to compare this polarization to other types of prejudice. The social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) suggests that identities are formed when individuals categorize themselves and others into groups and then develop a sense of self based on group membership and the values or traits the group shares. A group's entitativity, or "groupness" (Campbell, 1958), relies on group members' perception of factors such as shared values or common goals. When group members share strong beliefs or visions, their ingroup identity is strengthened. Further, a prototypical ingroup member is often perceived as more extreme than the average member, and through self-categorization and identification with the ingroup, group members may become more extreme in their beliefs and behaviors as they conform to the ingroup norm (McGarty et al., 1992).

In the case of the Capitol attack, many group members considered themselves patriots, believing firmly that the presidential election was fraudulent and that action was necessary (The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021). This shared concern, combined with the belief that their group was protecting the democracy, led to a strengthened political identity and polarized attitude among group members in the weeks leading up to the attack. As a result, "normal" individuals traveled to the Capitol on January 6, fueled by their political identity and shared goal.

This increased emphasis on political identity has led to the levels of affective polarization that we see today and the openness with which that polarization is displayed. Although other prejudices certainly still exist in American society, public opinion has shifted to discourage explicitly prejudicial rhetoric. Measures of explicit bias based on race or sexual orientation, for example, have declined (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019), suggesting that individuals are aware that such attitudes are no longer accepted and are less willing to display these attitudes, even if the individual retains some level of implicit bias. Yet, the opposite trend appears for affective polarization: Americans are not shy about expressing their animosity toward political outgroups (see Iyengar et al., 2019, for a review).

A similar trend is visible in the rhetoric of media figures, politicians, and other opinion leaders. Ideological polarization among members of Congress is more extreme than among members of the general population (McCarty et al., 2006) and has been steadily increasing for several decades (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although minimal research examines affective polarization among political elites, evidence suggests that ideological and affective polarization are particularly connected among elites (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017), which influences levels of affective polarization among ordinary citizens (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). Thus, before discussing events on the day of January 6, we need to discuss the role former President Trump's rhetoric played in mass polarization, radicalization, and normalizing the violence.

"Be There, Will Be Wild!": The Role of Rhetoric

Many charged in the January 6 Capitol attack were not affiliated with far-right extremist groups, such as The Oath Keepers or Proud Boys, and have been described as a "hodgepodge" of extremist attitudes (Beckett, 2021). However, the glue that pulled them together was the rhetoric of former President Trump, both before and during January 6. In a polarized

political environment, politicians use polarizing rhetoric to stimulate their supporters (March, 2020), which may be particularly useful in rallying a politician's "core supporters" (Fenno, 1977). Partisans tend to be persuaded by morally congruent political rhetoric (Clifford et al., 2015), and thus, are more likely to adopt a politically extreme attitude. Partisans—especially strong ones—are often very tolerant of affectively polarizing rhetoric (March, 2020).

Affective polarization, combined with social norms that do not discourage expression of outparty animus, has led to a rise in rhetoric that demonizes the opposing party and its members. This type of commentary has ranged from attacks on specific outparty leaders (former President Trump labeling Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar as "anti-Semitic" Rascoe, 2019 or Speaker Pelosi calling Republican Congressman Kevin McCarthy "a moron" Sotomayor & Wagner, 2021) to insults directed at members of the opposing political party (labeling individuals as "racist" or "snowflakes" [McIntosh, 2020]). Such rhetoric from elites has been shown to increase negative emotions, such as animosity toward outgroups (Stapleton & Dawkins, 2021; Wahlstrom et al., 2021), and encourage individuals to express existing counter-normative attitudes (Muller & Schwarz, 2020) or engage in violence (Piazza, 2020). Kalmoe (2014) found exposure to violent metaphors increased support for political violence, even when the language was relatively mild.

By former President Trump stating "they're not taking this White House—we're going to fight like hell" (Joyella, 2021) or former Mayor Giuliani calling for "trial by combat" (Del Rosario, 2021), they were hinting at what might be expected on January 6. Supporters picked up on this message; for example, one wrote a tweet with battle overtones stating "The calvary (sic) is coming, Mr. President." (Bencks, 2021, January 12). We see examples of this rhetoric leading up to January 6, during which former President Trump and other leaders characterized the 2020 presidential election as a *threat* to democracy and an *attack* on the Constitution and American way of life (Troyer, 2020). This was how former President Trump used polarizing rhetoric and how his supporters, as a result, cultivated a more politically extreme attitude. Former President Trump has consistently used polarizing rhetoric on Twitter to garner support from American citizens since his inauguration (Rowland, 2019). Twitter allowed former President Trump and his supporters to interact while bypassing mainstream/legacy media. Like the selective exposure mechanism mentioned above, core Trump supporters may have been consistently exposed to former President Trump's rhetoric that mainstream media is not trustworthy and even "fake"—which may have contributed to individuals holding an extremely negative attitude toward the opposite party, distrusting the mainstream claim that the election was fair, and engaging in extreme behavior at the Capitol. Former President Trump's repeated claims on social media of a stolen election helped to polarize and radicalize possibly millions of citizens toward extremism (Beckett, 2021). In other words, political elites' appeals to the political ingroup and critiques of the political outgroup led to real-world consequences. Both the overall trend toward negative outparty rhetoric and specific examples leading up to January 6 suggest that some members of the crowd gathering in Washington, DC, were already primed for extreme behavior.

As summarized by Michael Jensen, a senior researcher, who specializes in radicalization at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (quoted in Beckett, 2021), "What we witnessed on January 6 wasn't a one-off extremist plot. We witnessed an instance of mass radicalization which turned into an instance of mass mobilization." This mass radicalization through the former President's rhetoric, social media networking, affiliation groups, affective polarization and identity, and partisan media mobilized people to the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Next, we take a closer look at the events of that day.

Conditions for Polarization on the Day of January 6

Given the conditions for polarization preceding January 6, on the day of the Capitol attack, you have a gathering of like-minded people embedded in groups and networks, both through social media and in family and friend groups that corroborated their opinion. Further, somewhat under half had traveled to Washington, DC, with their groups (Beckett, 2021). There was a continuum of protesters—some came for protest,

some fighting mad by the false narrative of the stolen election but without a general plan, and others with specific plans for political violence. However, rally participants involved a group of people with similar attitudes toward a stolen election with former President Trump and extremists at the protest urging them toward more action. Below, we walk through January 6 to put these in context. First, we start with the rally at the National Mall.

"I'll Be There With You .... We're Going to Walk Down to the Capitol"—Former President Trump

At a rally on January 6, former President Trump continued his polarizing rhetoric. In this section, we specifically address sanctioning by former President Trump in his rhetoric and endorsement of a norm and how this contributed to extreme behavior. During a rally on the National Mall, former President Trump's repeated use of profanity and use of the word "fight" (Associated Press, 2021) signaled norm breaking and sanctioning of more extremity (Gross, 2021). The rally served to organize the various protesters toward the Capitol. As reporter Luke Mogelson stated (quoted from interview with Gross, 2021),

> I think that the majority of people who were there were just generally geared up and prepared for some kind of violence. So once all these folks were gathered on the Mall and listening to former President Trump, I think that they could have been sent in any number of directions. What did happen was former President Trump specifically directed them towards a target, a specific target, and that was the Capitol.

Further, former President Trump's promise to "go with" the protesters gave them the green light and served as a sanctioning role from the highest authority—the President of the United States. In his interview with Gross (2021), reporter Luke Mogelson stated that the sanctioning role of former President Trump's rhetoric was apparent as protesters looked at one another with "astonishment and joy" at the prospect of President Trump going to the Capitol with them. Essentially, many of the protesters believed they were following what President Trump wanted them to do (Marovich, 2021). As Mogelson stated (quoted from interview with Gross, 2021), "They believed that they were acting at the behest of the president." Many of those arrested stated they were following orders given by former President Trump (Pape & Ruby, 2021), illustrating the power of former President Trump's rhetoric as an authority figure in sanctioning a norm for the group of protesters. As protesters marched toward the Capitol and conditions started to escalate, we highlight another condition of polarization: easy exit.

Easy Exit

Another condition for attitude polarization in groups identified by Sunstein (2009) in his book, *Going to Extremes*, is ease of exit. If those who disagree with the trajectory of a group can easily leave, this reduces the chance of pushback and dissent. For participants attending the January 6 protest at the Capitol, as conditions devolved toward violence, those who were uncomfortable with this direction could simply walk away or hang back on the periphery. The metro was within walking distance. As detailed by one protest attendee, "My group at this point decided to leave the event because what started as a show of support for President Trump had been turned into a riot and attack on the Capitol and the police." (Schiller, 2021). This left more and more polarized actors, inclined toward violence, providing visible social proof that the gathered group sanctioned a violent response.

Social Proof

As an easy exit on January 6 allowed those who did not support violence to leave, extremists could work to pull those still present toward more extreme behavior. Although only a minority of those charged in the Capitol attack have ties to far-right groups, these far-right individuals who actively planned for violence (Richer & Kunzelman, 2021) may have been crucial in polarizing and escalating others who may have just been angry or more vaguely prepared for extreme action (Beckett, 2021). A year after the attack, 40 people have been charged with conspiracy to coordinate with others, and these defendants tend to be members of far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters (Hymes et al., 2022). As noted by sociologist Alex R. Piquero, although people chose to attend the protest, "There is causation—there is something about being in the collective group at the same space and time, and people can

be influenced by the crowd, especially when emotions run high among like-minded people." (as quoted by Jones, 2021). People chose to attend the rally and had aligned interests, which set the stage to follow emergent norms. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at American University, stated "Although militants were a small part of the mob, their organizational tactics could have influenced others' behavior and made the riot more violent." (as quoted in Valentino-Devries et al., 2021).

Research on group polarization in cascades offers an explanation. Behavior and norms in groups do not tend to emerge simultaneously among members, but often occur sequentially in cascades. In an information cascade, early actors in an ingroup can provide social proof and create a norm for those with more uncertainty about how to act. Further, if those who disagree with the actions of the early actors can leave the situation, the resulting lack of dissent does not provide an alternative to those uncertain of what to do (Sunstein, 2009). Those who are more ambivalent about violent action might then not express their doubts to other ingroup members, feeding into more polarized action. Therefore, if a core group of extremists begin to act violently, others who are inclined to violence but do not necessarily have specific plans may follow their lead.

In other words, there was concurrent grave immorality and thoughtlessness to their extreme actions (Arendt, 1964), as evidenced by the cluelessness of some participants to grasp the gravity of their actions by posting them on social media and failing to understand the consequences (The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021). The norms of the increasingly violent crowd may have led to ethical fading of the consequences of participating in the Capitol attack. If only a minority of participants (Pape & Ruby, 2021) had attended the January 6 protest with the planned intention for violence and storming the Capitol, the above conditions could polarize more toward action. A core group of extremists who were committed to violence, a larger group of like-minded people who were sympathetic to the ideas, and a possible lack of dissent due to easy exit could have created a situation in which those who were more "moderate" could exit and others could be polarized by the social proof surrounding them of like-minded individuals who believed in the same lie of a fraudulent election.

The consequences of polarization, ranging from decreased bipartisan political cooperation to declining trust in government (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015) to outpartisan animosity (Iyengar et al., 2019), have been well documented in existing literature. However, applying the conditions of group polarization to the January 6 Capitol attack suggests even more concerning implications. It is easy to underestimate the danger of extremist movements, believing that "extreme" arguments will not garner public support. The case of the January 6 attack demonstrates the danger of such thinking. Fueled by conditions, such as homophilic social networks and strong political identities, ordinary individuals may then find themselves engaged in extreme actions, where social proof and leaders' rhetoric fuel violence. When the conditions are right, ordinary Americans can become extreme, and the events of January 6 demonstrate that these conditions are becoming increasingly likely.

Preventing Polarization

By alluding to Hannah Arendt's (1964) reference to the *banality of evil* in our title, we certainly do not see the January 6 Capitol attack as a moral equivalent to the actions of Adolf Eichmann and others in perpetrating the Jewish Holocaust, but the same sense that ordinary people can engage in extreme behavior applies. Further, by investigating the sanctioning by elites and norm-following of political violence, we by no means absolve the participants of blame; information about the illegality of their actions was readily available if they chose to thoughtfully seek it out. They are fully accountable. Rather, we seek to understand the mechanisms behind why "normal" (Pape & Ruby, 2021) people engaged in violence and illegal behavior and find answers to forestall this in the future. Certainly, the role of social media in incentivizing extreme rhetoric with likes and retweets created norms toward extremism (Hopp et al., 2020). In this sense, digital media literacy is crucial to tackle extremism on social media. People are often unaware of how social media algorithms work to direct their exposure to news (Aragona, 2021) and to expose them to extreme content. Although digital media literacy is, of course, not a panacea in solving extremism on social media, it can still prevent some people

from falling into extremism. Further, there are efforts to hold technology companies accountable for their role (Broadwater & Isaac, 2022).

Trusted authority figures' use of violent rhetoric against political opponents served as a sanctioning role for extreme behavior, and they need to be held to account. It is increasingly important that ingroup members call out their own group members for polarizing or violent rhetoric, as they may have more credibility than outgroup members (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Also, the increasing acceptability of prejudice, even dehumanizing prejudice, toward political outgroups stands in contrast to other societal trends to combat other types of prejudice. Research on intergroup dynamics can offer a way forward for these increasingly polarized groups, suggesting that mechanisms such as intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011) might decrease affective polarization levels. Further, much political polarization is affective, and substantive policy polarization is less pronounced than many people think (Kleinfeld & Sobel, 2020). Highlighting substantive issues over emotional reactions could offer space for common ground.

We acknowledge there are limitations to this piece. We used news sources to develop an interpretation of events on January 6 through a theoretical lens. We certainly were not comprehensive in our coverage of the events of January 6. In addition, not everyone who was exposed to far-right information on social media acted the same way. In fact, those who were violent on the January 6 attack on the Capitol were a minority of the protesters, as many protesters left or did not enter the Capitol building. Yet, our article does not explain why, because we neither launched a survey nor interviewed them. Our discussion of theory is by no means predictive of what someone exposed to content on social media will do. Future researchers should empirically test the theoretical mechanisms we proposed when explaining other extremist movements. Although most of the previous research in this area focuses on "individual factors" that mobilize protest participants, we presented various group dynamics that affect the mobilization process. Research that empirically applies these mechanisms to extremist movements would have potential in testing our theoretical explanations and extending social movement scholarship.

Ultimately, this "broader mass political movement that has violence at its core" (Pape & Ruby, 2021) is a dangerous development we are just starting to understand, and rather than offering a reflective moment to precipitate change and reduce political polarization, a year out, the events of January 6 are proving to further increase polarization, as competing narratives emerge and those charged in the attack are often being portrayed as martyrs (Robins-Early, 2022). As noted by Braddock (as quoted by Robins-Early, 2022) "January 6 exemplified what the far right is now, but it definitely doesn't end with January 6."

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