Significant Factors in Anti-Government Group Social Mobilization:
An Application of Quantitative Methods for Historical Analysis
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Literature Review

The State of the Field
So-called "Patriot" militia organizations became a hot topic of interest for academics and journalists alike following the 1995 "Unabomber" attacks of the Oklahoma City Federal building. Timothy McVeigh, the perpetrator of these attacks, was widely reported to have ties to militia organizations, spurring a decades-long spike of sociological interest in both militant and non-militant anti-government ("Patriot") groups in the 1990s.[1,2] Antigovernment groups were by no means a novel occurrence of recent decades. In fact, in the burst of literature that followed, sociologists utilized pre-existing social movement theories to help explain the rise in these groups. Some scholars applied these theories to in-depth, qualitative studies of individual militants and anti-government organizations, some utilized them to guide state- and county-level quantitative approaches, and others used combined and updated these theories to the realities of the present.

Unfortunately, the recent decade has not seen the same fevered academic interest sustained for the study of American anti-government group mobilization. I suspect this is due, in part, to newfound interest in Islamic terrorist group mobilization and recruitment – a likely consequence of the 9/11 attack on the U.S. World Trade Center by the Al-Qaeda terrorist group. The field of domestic terrorism has also shifted towards a renewed attention to "hate groups" and "hate crimes," further diluting academic focus on domestic antigovernment group formation. This is especially disheartening due to observed increases in the number of American antigovernment groups over the past ten years. Indeed, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported a massive spike in anti-government groups from 2009-2012; most shockingly, the year 2012 saw a nearly 10-fold increase in the number of antigovernment groups compared to annual numbers of antigovernment groups observed during the period from 2000-2008.

Although the academic field examining right-wing, militant group mobilization has expanded considerably to include terrorist groups both international and domestic and a new focus on "hate

[1] Because this study will use data collected from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) *Intelligence Report*, the terms "Patriot" or "anti-government" groups will refer to the SPLC definition, which defines these groups "as opposed to the 'New World Order,'" and who "engage in groundless conspiracy theorizing, or advocate or adhere to extreme antigovernment doctrines. Antigovernment groups do not necessarily advocate or engage in violence or other criminal activities, though some have. Many warn of impending government violence or the need to prepare for a coming revolution. Many antigovernment groups are not racist." Southern Poverty Law Center. *Antigovernment Movement*. Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/antigovernment. Accessed April 23, 2017.

[2] Militant groups, or militias, are not necessarily violent groups. The Southern Poverty Law Center designates groups as "militias" if they "[engage] in paramilitary training aimed at protecting citizens from…feared impending government crackdown." Southern Poverty Law Center. *Antigovernment Movement*. Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/antigovernment. Accessed April 23, 2017

groups" and "hate crimes," this literature review will focus exclusively on academic studies that examine anti-government group mobilization within the United States. I will begin by offering a brief summary of relevant social movement theories, then will proceed with a wider discussion of the recent studies of antigovernment group formation.

Social Movement Theories

Social movement theories offer a helpful guide for understanding what types of factors may contribute to the formation of "Patriot" groups. Scholars of antigovernment groups have primarily focused on the reactionary and structural causes of social movement formation.[3] I outline two key families of theory in the field, below.

Social Strain Theories

Theories of social strain propose that structural changes to an individual's social, cultural, or political environment result in psychological strain. To cope with this strain, individuals may turn to social movements, such as antigovernment groups, in hopes of restoring traditional order and stability and/or in hopes of managing the stress of these changes. Social strain can take many forms, stemming from economic (Dobratz and Shankes-Meile 1997) and political (Tilly 1978) change. Changes to rural farming cultures (Dyer 1997) and increasing migrant populations and/or ethnic cultures (Lipset and Raab 1970) have also been identified as a source of social strain in antigovernment group formation. More "modern" types of social strain produced by the globalization and technological advances have also been applied to studies of militia movement formation specific to recent decades (Castells 1997).

However, social strain theories are not always applied in isolation. For example, Neil Smelser's Theory of Collective Behavior (Smelser 1963) combines social strain theories with a structurally determinist view of society, positing that social structures must firstly be conducive to social movement formation for any mobilization to occur. Even after strain is introduced, charismatic leaders and social control mechanisms (such as socio-cultural norms and values) play critical roles in defining the nature and character of any resulting social movement formation. A more recent application of social strain theory combines the strain caused on individual social status from feminist and civil rights movements with a growing American "paramilitary culture" to explain the rise of militia movements among American males (Gibson 1994). Regardless whether they are applied solo or in tandem with other forces, social strain theories all assume that social movements form, at least in part, due to *reactionary* behavior.

Resource Mobilization Theories

Resource mobilization theories presume that structural inequalities exist among society members, but will not result in social movement formation unless resources (social, cultural, economic, political) can be sufficiently mobilized to overcome the structural forces that perpetuate the very structural inequalities that populations are seeking to overcome (McCarthy

[3] Though by no means complete, I offer here a couple examples of theories from the literature that do not fall cleanly into the reactionary or structural theories types: In *Rage on the Right*, politics and government professor Lane Crothers emphasizes the pre-existing cultural foundations that facilitated the formation and growth of several key American militant groups throughout the 1990s. These cultural foundations include the crucible of pre-existing American myths, ideology and political cultures that fused a "populist justification of rage" with militia ideology. In an even earlier attempt, Adorno et. al (1950) put forth a theory proposing that individuals with "authoritarian" personalities were more likely to join extreme social movements, see *The Authoritarian Personality*.

and Zald 1977). McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly famously refined resource mobilization theory by emphasizing the opportunism within social movement formation, citing the importance of capitalizing upon the dynamic emergence of political opportunities and of appropriating existing institutions for efficient mobilization and recruitment (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001). Resource mobilization theories place specific focus on the structural realities that facilitate or obstruct the formation of social movements. Homogeneous populations, community institutions like churches and synagogues, economic prosperity, and higher-education levels are structural factors that might play a role in facilitating the successful formation of social movements, and more specifically, antigovernment groups.[4]

Recent Studies from the Field

A Discussion of Available Datasets

Many sociologists have put the social strain and resource mobilization theories to use in the study of American antigovernment group formation. However, much of the difficulty in applying quantitative approaches to the study of antigovernment group comes from the paucity of data on the subject. No U.S. federal agency currently tracks the national trends in the formation of antigovernment and hate groups. The two organizations best known for collecting such data are the American Defamation League (ADL) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Unfortunately, since the ADL stopped collecting such data since 1995, recent scholars have overwhelmingly been forced to rely upon SPLC antigovernment and hate group databases for their analysis. This is complicated for two reasons: firstly, the inclusion of such groups in the SPLC's annual database is highly dependent on the SPLC's ability to not only find, but also correctly classify whether a group is a hate group, antigovernment group, and/or is militant using "field reports, group publications, the Internet, law enforcement sources and news reports" alone, while also correctly identifying whether or not a group is active.[5] Secondly, the SPLC has been criticized by some scholars for its bias against paramilitary groups (Aho 1990, Chermak 2002, Dobratz and Shankes-Meile 1997). Unfortunately, this bias is difficult to confirm or deny given the supposed confidentiality of some SPLC sources, and the absence of any comparable dataset for purposes of comparison.

Some scholars have attempted to bypass complete reliance on the SPLC data by combining quantitative approaches with a qualitative approach, involving (hand-coded) content analysis of Internet posts and follow-up interviews (Weber and Rodeheaver 2004). Weber and Rodeheaver enhanced the list of 1996 and 1997 SPLC identified militia groups with their own research of antigovernment groups, obtained through Internet searches and other news sources to obtain a final list of 244 militias of interest for their study. This allowed them to comment on the geographic representativeness of the results obtained using SPLC-identified militia groups by looking at the relative geographic spread of Internet-only (non-SPLC-identified) militia groups. Other scholars of hate groups and hate crimes have also attempted to skirt the issue by

[4] It may seem odd to speak of economic prosperity and higher-education levels in the same breath as "structural inequality." Structural inequality does not necessarily always take on economic or educational character. Imbalance of power, or perceived status inequalities (male versus female, urban versus rural) may also serve as indicators of structural inequality against which antigovernment group members may wish to mobilize.

[5] Southern Poverty Law Center. *Active Patriot Groups in the US in 2016.* Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/active-patriot-groups-us-2016 . Accessed April 23, 2017.

combining SPLC's "sister database" of hate groups with in-depth, journalistic-type research into the organizational-level characteristics of specific hate groups to identify independent variables not found in any one database for use in logistic regression models. These independent variables include characteristics like recruitment tactics, leadership type, perception of public legitimacy, primary ideological concern, and membership demographics (Chermak, Freilich and Suttmoeller 2013). Unfortunately, though these approaches avoid complete reliance on SPLC data, they are also limited in the generalizability of their results, since neither of their final datasets can claim representativeness of American antigovernment groups (or hate groups, depending on the study in question). Still to this day, only the SPLC datasets alone attempt to capture all groups that fall within the antigovernment or hate group categories.

Freilich and Pridemore carried out a commendable study comparing the different results obtained when applying 1995 SPLC, 1996 SPLC, 1995 ADL data to state-level analyses of antigovernment group formation using OLS and negative binomial regression (Freilich and Pridemore 2006). Ultimately, the authors' results do not make a compelling case to disregard SPLC data altogether. At best, their results make a strong case for disregarding ADL data, while also confirming the robustness of the correlation between rates of Gulf War veterans and paramilitary culture with state-level anti-government group formation. Regardless of the criticism levied against it, thanks to its continued availability and geographic specificity, the SPLC dataset remains the primary dataset relied upon for tracking antigovernment (and hate) group formation at county and state levels: ultimately, it simply remains the best available option for scholars in the field.

Findings from the Field

Sociologists, criminologists and government agencies have put considerable effort into the study of antigovernment groups. A 2009 leaked government report (now unclassified) from the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Intelligence and Analysis theorized that the recent 2007-2009 economic recession and the election of the first black president "are driving a resurgence in rightwing extremist recruitment and radicalization activity."[6] The same report goes on to discuss parallels between present-day domestic, rightwing extremist rhetoric and significant rightwing mobilizing factors from the 1990s, including concerns over "economic hardship," "illegal immigration," "legislative drivers" such as restrictive gun and ammunition laws, and the "perceived risk of threat from other countries," as well as continued evidence of active recruitment by extremist groups of "disgruntled military veterans."[7]

This government report agrees strongly with the findings of academic case-studies of 1990s American antigovernment groups (for some examples, see Stern 1996, Crothers 2003). However, other case studies have also pointed to the importance of religious activity in antigovernment group formation and recruitment (Aho 1990, Kelley and Villaire 2002, Akins 1998, Crothers 2003) that was not accounted for within the government report.

[6] See page 3 of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security report: *Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment.*

[7] See pages 4-7 of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security report: *Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment.*

Sociologists and criminologists have also attempted to use more quantitative approaches to determine what factors affect antigovernment group formation. Unfortunately, most quantitative studies rely on only 1-3 years of antigovernment group data, fail to cover recent decades of antigovernment formation, and rely on either OLS or negative binomial regression models (Dyke and Soule 2002, Freilich 2003, Freilich and Pridemore 2005, O'Brien and Haider-Markel 1998). The results of these studies generally show more evidence to support social strain theories than resource mobilization theories. Factors that support resource mobilization theories were not significant in any of the proposed models: education (O'Brien and Haider-Markel 1998), anti-militia/paramilitary training statues (Freilich 2003), membership in evangelical Protestant churches (Freilich and Pridemore 2005), conservative voting patterns (Freilich and Pridemore 2005, Dyke and Soule 2002). However, factors that tend to support social strain theories were found to correlate significantly and positively with state and county-level antigovernment group formation: Gulf war veterans (O'Brien and Haider-Markel 1998), economic disruption due to job loss or loss of farms (Dyke and Soule 2002, Freilich and Pridemore 2005), increased paramilitary cultural index (Freilich and Pridemore 2003).

However, these studies also differ in surprising and puzzling ways. Only Dyke and Soule found significant correlations between increases in the non-white population and antigovernment group formation. This finding was confirmed at both the county and state levels, with significance increasing considerably at the county-level analysis, but seem to contradict Freilich and Pridemore's results, who controlled for demographic variations by examining the number of "white, non-Hispanic males" only, where Dyke and Soule used a dummy variable to denote "above average increase[s]" in non-white populations. Similarly, Dyke and Soule found evidence to support Gibson's theory of "backlash" against feminist movements, finding significant correlation between the percentage of female legislators and the formation of antigovernment groups, while Freilich and Pridemore's measure of female empowerment ("ratio of female median income to male median income") showed no significant correlation to antigovernment group formation.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make sense of the results of this study for a couple different reasons. Firstly, as is obvious from the discussion above, authors operationalized their variables in different ways, which makes it difficult to tell exactly why one theory appears validated by one study, while in another, it is not. Secondly, the O'Brien and Haider-Markel study utilizes ADL data, which as previously discussed, may not be a sufficiently accurate means dataset for this type of analysis (see Freilich and Pridemore 2006). Because antigovernment group research has declined in academic favor or interest over the past decade, there is little literature available to resolve these discrepancies.

More Recent Quantitative Approaches: The Field of Hate Group and Hate Crime Studies
More recent quantitative analyses of violent social group formation have been performed in the field of hate crime and hate group studies. Though these applications of quantitative analyses do not map directly onto antigovernment group formation theories, these newer studies are considerably more ambitious than the quantitative analyses on antigovernment group formation discussed above, extending the period of analysis and accounting for temporal factors. These newer studies also tend to use county-level, instead of state-level analyses, which offer an arguably more finely-tuned assessment of influencing factors. Here I submit two interesting

studies that are hopefully illustrative of this new direction in the field. In a 2014 study, Adamcyzk et al. examined two decades of hate group groups and far-right ideological violence. In order to account for a theorized difference in hate group trends in the period before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, authors performed separate logistic regression on data from the1990s and 2000s to explore the effects of this historical event (Adamczyk, Gruenewald, Chermak, Freilich 2014). Another study from 2013 used fixed effects methodology to capture temporal county-level changes to explore the relationship between white supremacist groups and hate crimes from 1997 to 2007 (Mulholland 2013). Though similar approaches have yet to be applied to American antigovernment group formation studies, the two studies above strongly indicate that improvements to the quantitative study of antigovernment group formation are not only possible, but necessary, in future studies to come.

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