

The Scope and Nature of the American Insurrection Movement:

From The Fringe to the Mainstream

Written Testimony of

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Chairman Thompson, distinguished Members of the Committee. It is a privilege to be invited to provide testimony about my research on the insurrectionist movement in the United States. This testimony will cover the relationship between the insurrectionist movement, stolen election claims, and efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election—including the January 6th attack on the US Capitol, and the continuing threat of the insurrectionist movement to American multicultural democracy.

I am a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats, a center at the university dedicated to national security research. I have been studying political violence for 30 years; for 20 years, I have focused on terrorism and propaganda. Since Spring 2020, following the death of George Floyd, I have been conducting a project that looks at American political violence during protests in the largest 50 cities in America. Since January 6, I have extended my research to the insurrection.

In summary, my testimony will show:

1. The Insurrectionist movement is a political movement rooted in the mainstream of American society, not limited to the fringe.
2. Those charged in connection to the January 6 assault on the Capitol were overwhelmingly Trump activists from the middle class, urban and suburban areas, and not mainly militia members or from the reddest parts of America. They saw themselves as acting out of a patriotic duty to prevent an illegitimate president from assuming power. Although some have expressed remorse for breaking the law, only 24 of the people sentenced prior to March 15, 2022 have disavowed the political motives for their actions in the first place.
3. The Insurrectionist movement is large and remains active. Based on nationally-representative public opinion surveys, our estimate of the scope of the movement of people is in the tens of millions.
4. A key grievance animating the movement is the fear of the “Great Replacement”: the idea that Liberals and the Democratic Party are deliberately shifting the demographic makeup of the United States against the non-Hispanic White population for political purposes.

Let me explain.

We are at a precarious moment in our nation’s history. On January 6th, 2021, the United States experienced an act of domestic political violence unprecedented in US history unlike any since the Civil War. A violent mob estimated by law enforcement to number over 2,000 breached the American Capitol to prevent the certification of Joe Biden as President of the United States. Many thousands also battled with police outside the Capitol that day.

To be clear, the assault on the US Capitol was a violent uprising, intended to prevent the American government from executing its Constitutionally mandated duties. It thus constitutes “an insurrection” by our ordinary understanding of that term in politics, history, and society. Further, the assault involved collective political violence – thousands of people violently

breaking laws for a political purpose. It represents a loosely organized but sustained collective effort and as such is a “movement” by our ordinary understanding of that term.¹

Moreover, evidence shows that the impulses associated with the January 6 assault on the Capitol did not end that day. Indeed, tens of millions of American adults continue to sympathize with violent insurrectionist sentiments. They view Joe Biden as an illegitimate president who stole the 2020 presidential election and view the use of force as justified to restore Donald J. Trump to the presidency. Millions with these views are politically active, and report active participation in protest and other political activities. A fine-grained diagnosis of the scope and drivers of the insurrectionist movement is necessary to assess the risk of political violence in the 2022 mid-term and 2024 US Presidential elections.

For decades, Americans have become used to thinking of right-wing extremism as emanating from the fringes of society. In the common understanding right-wing extremists make up just a tiny fraction of the country and are economically destitute, often unemployed, and come from the rural parts of the United States.

This insurrectionist movement, however, is different. An in-depth look at who broke into the U.S. Capitol, the size of the insurrection movement in the United States today, the ideas motivating the movement, and their media consumption habits shows that the old patterns in right-wing extremism no longer apply.

Our analyses paint a new, startling reality: The insurrectionist movement is mainstream, not simply confined to the political fringe, right-wing militias, and white nationalist extremist groups.

In order to understand this new movement, we need to know 1) “who” were the people charged for breaking into the Capitol on January 6; 2) what types of social settings they are from; 3) their political mindset as they stormed the Capitol; 4) how widespread are sympathies for the January 6 insurrection; 5) how similar are the social and political drivers of the insurrectionist movement in the general public to the social and political drivers of the January 6th insurrectionists; and 6) the impact of social and other media on the insurrectionist movement.

In this testimony, I will present the findings of two sets of studies that answer these questions. The first set of studies uses public records, especially court documents, to gather information about the 716 individuals arrested as of January 1: demographics, home county characteristics, and their stated motives. The second set of studies uses nationally representative surveys to understand national scope, drivers, and media consumption of the insurrectionist movement after the January 6th assault on the Capitol. These studies are the product of research at the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats, involving major contributions by Dr. Keven Ruby, Dr. Kyle Larson, Dr. Christopher Price, and a team of 25-30 student researchers.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-movement>

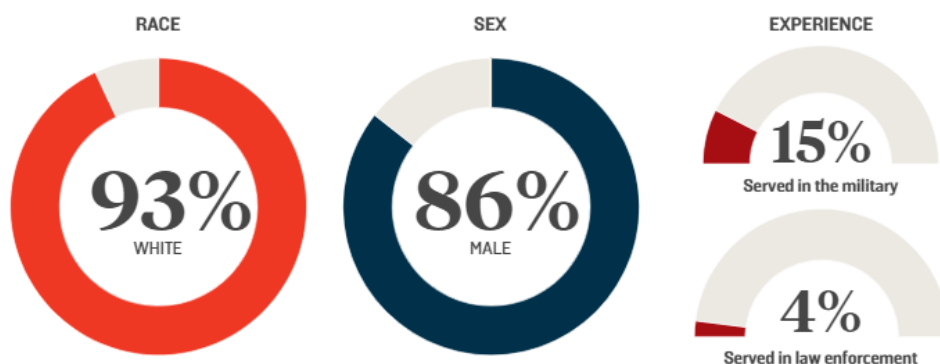
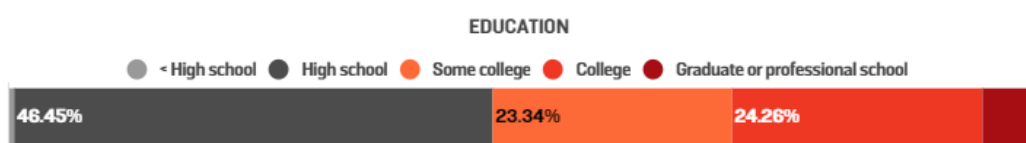
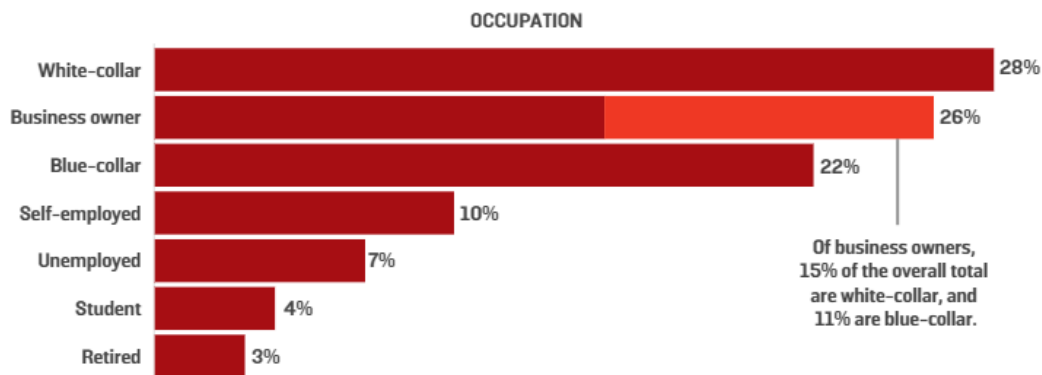
Understanding “who” were the January 6th Insurrectionists. What is most striking about the individuals charged for actions associated with assaulting the US Capitol on January 6 is that they (1) are largely middle-class Americans with white collar occupations, (2) from counties that Biden won in the 2020 presidential election, and (3) saw it as their patriotic duty to protect America from a stolen election. While they are Trump activists, they do not fit the common profile of a Trump voter as blue-collar and from rural “red” districts. For the most part, they are not members of militias or extremist groups, nor do many espouse “conspiracy” motives—such as QAnon or belief in the End Times—except one: the idea that the 2020 election was stolen.

To understand the January 6th Insurrectionists, large research teams at CPOST conducted exhaustive searches of all publicly available court documents, media reports, social media postings, and legal databases (e.g. PACER) for each individual charged with any offense related to the assault on the US Capitol up until January 1, 2022. The research, conducted over 15 months, adheres to the highest standards of social science. Accordingly, we have high confidence in the data. These reports are attached to this testimony, and I summarize their findings below.

The January 6th insurrectionists’ economic profile is striking. Of the 501 for whom we have employment data, over half are business owners, CEOs, or from white collar occupations, such as doctors, lawyers, and architects. Usually, right-wing extremists have an economic profile that includes high unemployment (25% or more), but the insurrectionists have only 7% unemployment—just about the national average at the time. The insurrectionists closely reflect the US electorate on other socio-economic variables too, such as age, education, employment, prior military service, and criminal record. They come from the mainstream of American society, not the fringes. This economic profile is very different than the usual profile of far right or other violent extremists.² The last time America saw middle class Whites involved in collective political violence was the expansion of the 2nd KKK in the 1920s.

² For comparison, see my study of 462 suicide attackers from around the world and 156 ISIS perpetrators in the United States in Pape, *Dying to Win* and Pape et al, *American Face of ISIS*.

Demographics of Those Charged

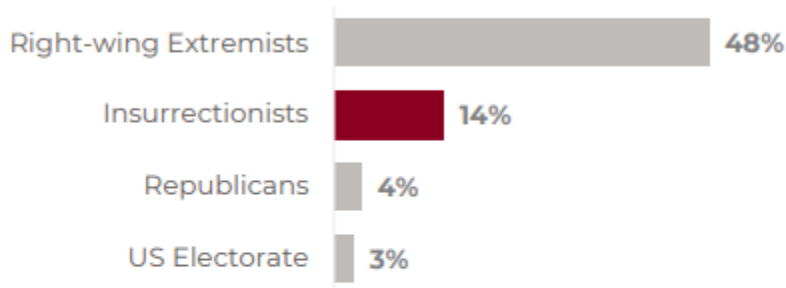


Note: Occupation category represents 501 of 716 of insurrectionists for whom researchers have employment data. Data on educational attainment available for 438 of the 716 charged. Data on other categories for all 716 charged for breaking into the Capitol as of Jan. 1.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PROJECT ON SECURITY AND THREATS

The relative absence of militia and extremist group ties is another important feature of the January 6th insurrectionists. Despite prominent examples in the media, only a small number were members of militia groups like the Oath Keepers or other right-wing extremist groups like the Proud Boys. In fact, nearly 90 percent were not affiliated with such groups. Although right-wing extremist group membership is higher among those charged for January 6 than it is in the general population, it is far lower than the approximately 50% that is typically observed for violent right-wing extremist arrested in the United States.

FIGURE 8. ARE MEMBERS OF ORGANIZED MILITANT GROUPS/GANGS



Note: Data on militant group membership/affiliation available for all 716 charged for breaking into the Capitol as of January 1, 2022. Data on right-wing extremist violent offenders based on US law enforcement arrests, 2015 through mid-2020. Data on electorate and Trump voters estimated from CPOST-NORC American Political Violence Survey (nationally representative) conducted June 9-17, 2021, N=1,070. percent answering "Yes" to "Are you (or is anyone you know) a member of a citizens' militia like the Oath Keepers or Three Percenters, or a right-wing group like the Proud Boys?" Gang membership for the US population estimated by the DOJ at 1 million. Data on gang membership among Republicans not available.

One might think that the extremist group members would make up a majority of people who committed acts of violence on January 6th, but our evidence shows this not to be the case. Only 21% of the people arrested for violence had pre-existing extremist or militia group ties—79% of those arrested for violence did not.

TABLE 4. COMPARING VIOLENT AND NON-VIOLENT INSURRECTIONISTS

	Overall	Non-violent	Violent
Age >=35	64%	65%	61%
White	92%	92%	93%
Male	86%	83%	94%
Business Owner	26%	23%	32%
White Collar	28%	31%	20%
Blue Collar	22%	22%	22%
Unemployed	7%	6%	9%
Retired	3%	3%	3%
College	31%	35%	22%
Military Service	15%	13%	20%
Militant Group	14%	11%	21%
Criminal Record	31%	28%	39%

What we are seeing is not the fringe of America, but the fringe spreading into the mainstream of America. "Normal" pro-Trump activists joined with the far right to form a new kind of violent mass movement. These were people who had something to lose. People like:

- Jenny Cudd, owner of a floral shop and former candidate for mayor in Midland, Texas, who stayed at the pricy Willard Hotel the night before breaking into the Capitol.
- Bradley Rukstales, the CEO of the data analytics marketing firm Cogensia.
- Jeffrey Sabol, a geophysicist from Colorado; Luke Russell Coffee, an actor, producer, and director of films from Dallas.
- Federico Klein, who lived in Virginia and worked as a special assistant at the U.S. State Department and had a top-secret security clearance.

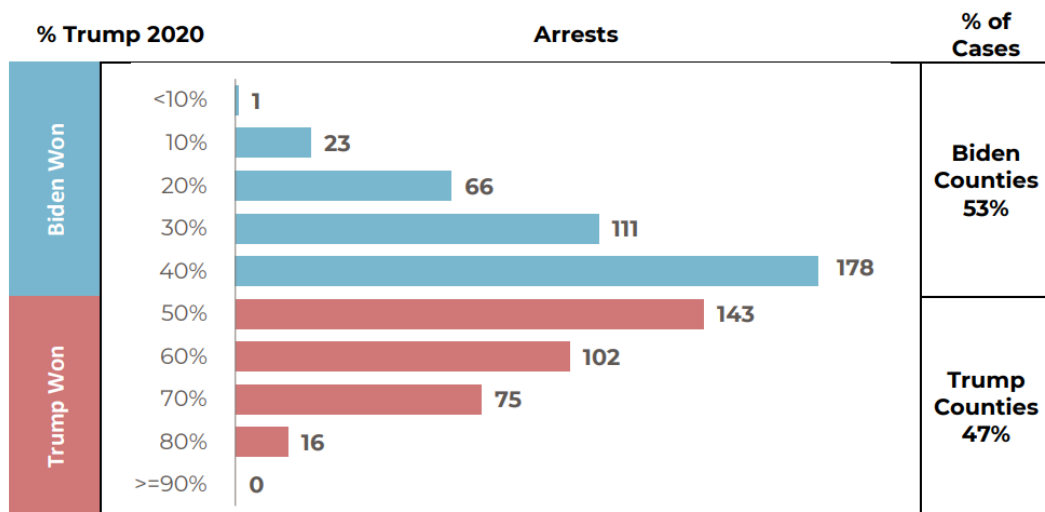
Hundreds more are from the mainstream just like them.

Understanding “where” the January 6th insurrectionists came from and the social characteristics of insurrectionist-prone counties. Reliable data on home county residence from court documents reveals important patterns in the political geography of the insurrectionists. The 716 came from 46 states plus the District of Columbia. Large pools came from New York (54) and California (50), some of America’s “bluest” states. Few came from some of the reddest parts of the country, including the mid-Western states of North Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

CPOST research drilled down further and examined home counties that the 716 charged for storming the Capitol came from. Since Trump’s voters are famously rural and from “red” states, one might expect that the insurrectionists would overwhelmingly reside in the most rural and “red” counties in America. However, that is not the case.

As the figure below (from our more detailed report in the appendix) shows, over half of the January 6 insurrectionists came from counties that Biden won in the 2020 presidential election, including from large urban democratic strongholds like Dallas, Houston, New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

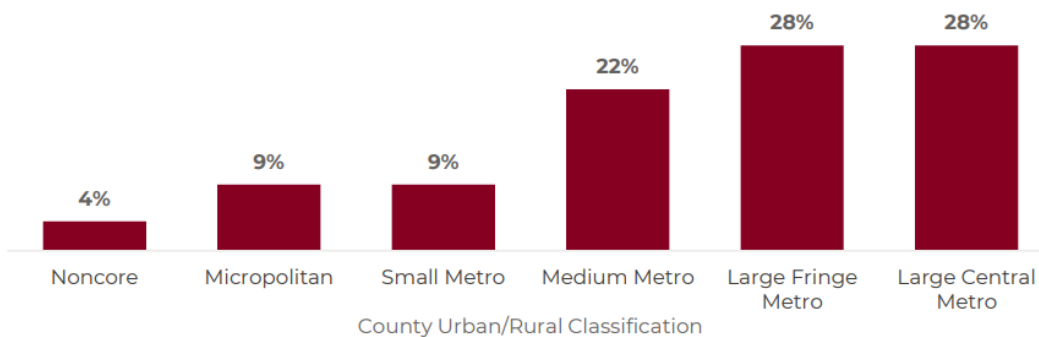
FIGURE 13. CHARGED BY HOME COUNTY % TRUMP VOTE



Note: Data on home county available for all 716 charged for breaking into the Capitol as of January 1, 2022. Data on country % vote for Trump in 2020 is from David Leip’s Atlas on US Elections and available for 715 cases (1 case from Alaska dropped because Alaska does not report votes by county).

Further, only 23% of insurrectionists came from counties that are more rural than urban, the same fraction as the national average of the 23% of the US population who live in this same classification. As the figure below shows, the insurrectionists are an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon.

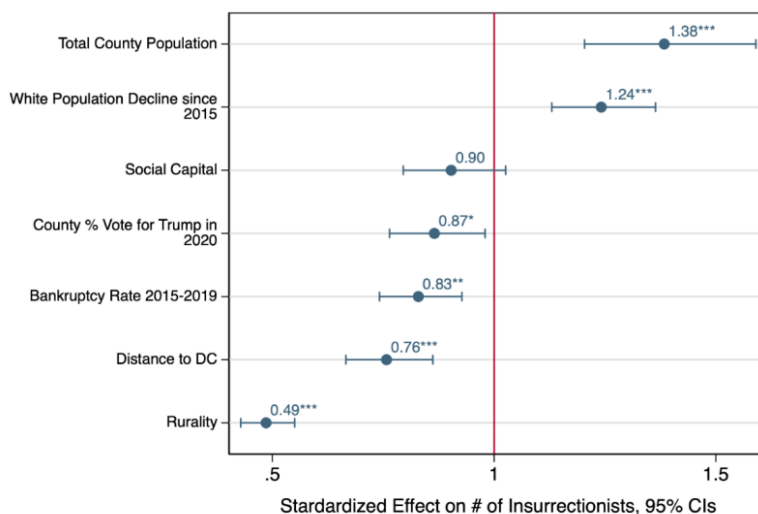
FIGURE 15. INSURRECTIONISTS AND US POPULATION BY HOME COUNTY % UNEMPLOYED



Note: Data on home county available for all 716 charged for breaking into the Capitol as of January 1, 2022. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), Rural Classification Scheme for Counties (2013).

What’s special about the social characteristics of the counties that produced insurrectionists? White fear of their declining demographics appears to be an important driver. Statistical analysis in the figure below shows that a key characteristic uniting the counties that produce insurrectionists is not vote for Trump or rurality, but where the white share of the population is declining fastest. The greater Trump’s margin of victory in the 2020 presidential election or the more rural the county, the less likely was the county to have an insurrectionist. For every 1% decline in the white population, the rate of insurrectionists increases by 25%; this would happen by chance less than 1 in a thousand times.

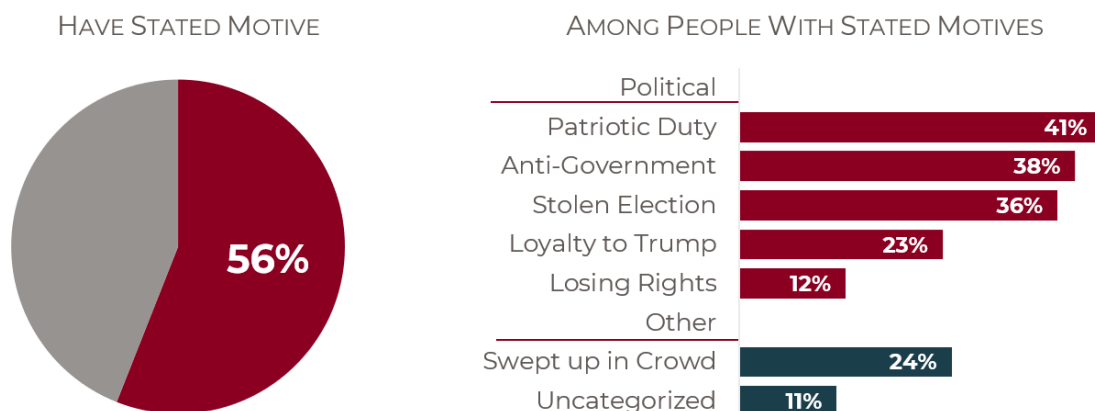
FIGURE 17. PREDICTING COUNTY LIKELIHOOD OF SENDING INSURRECTIONISTS



Why is the decline of white population so important? CPOST research was the first to call attention to the importance of how white population decline dovetails with a popular right-wing conspiracy theory called the “Great Replacement,”³ which was coined by the French far-right writer Renaud Camus. The Great Replacement has been cited as inspiration for other acts of far-right violence, including by the mass murderer who attacked two mosques in New Zealand. In the United States it has been popularized by right-wing media personality Tucker Carlson and others. The central idea of the Great Replacement is that majority white populations are being replaced by minorities through the deliberate machinations of Liberal leaders. With prominent far right politicians and media personalities telling whites that they are (1) being maliciously “replaced” by minorities and (2) destined to become second-class citizens, white decline in one’s community can reinforce and seemingly confirm these political and media narratives.

How the January 6th insurrectionists describe their political motives. A second element of our study of the insurrectionists involves their stated motives. Systematic analysis of public statements by those charged for January 6th offenses brings to light the sharply political nature of their behavior that these individuals. Of the 716 charged as of January 1, 2022, 56% made statements of motive either on social media or during interviews. Of those who made such statements, the overwhelming majority (83%) assert one of five political motives. As shown on the figure below (from a more detailed report in the appendix), a perceived “Patriotic Duty” is the most commonly expressed motive (41% of Jan 6th insurrectionists with stated motives), closely followed by anti-government animus (38%) and stolen election (36%), and, then, loyalty to Trump (23%) and fear of losing rights (12%).

FIGURE 1. STATED MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION IN JAN. 6 INSURRECTION



Note: Stated Motives available for 56% of those charged for breaking into the Capitol (as of January 1, 2022).
Updated: April 8, 2022.

³“Fears of White People Losing Out Permeate Capitol Rioters Towns, Study Finds,”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/us/politics/capitol-riot-study.html>

Few repudiate the core political motives for January 6th. Of the 114 who have completed the sentencing process in our study, only 24 defendants – 21% of the total -- disavowed any of the core political motives during the judicial process. In other words, nearly 80% did not repudiate the core stated objectives for storming the Capitol, even in a context where doing so would mean they could expect a more lenient sentence. By contrast, 96 of the 114 — 84% — offered statements of personal remorse such as “sorry,” “regret,” and “apology” for breaking the law, harming people, or damaging property, which includes all who repudiated stated motives.

The mindset of the January 6th insurrectionists engaged in the assault on the Capitol can be called “Patriotic Counter-Revolutionary.” This mindset says that support for the US Constitution requires anti-government violent action—not for the purpose of destroying democratic institutions, but to *preserve* them in the face of imminent threat. For those who stormed the Capitol, their perceived certainty that the 2020 presidential election was stolen—encouraged by politicians and media figures—meant that Biden’s confirmation as President constituted a revolutionary threat. They perceived that by conceding his legitimacy, “weak” or corrupt politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties would therefore suppress the sovereign will of the people.

As such, the main political motives of the January 6th insurrectionists revealed in our analysis are intimately connected in a common sense of purpose that helps to explain why violent action can appear justified. Public narratives of “Patriotic Counter-Revolution” redefine acts of harm to others, defiance of laws, and anti-government violence—normally considered significant violations of pledges to defend the US Constitution and American democracy—as legitimate acts of self-defense, community defense, and preservation of the American way of life.

Understanding the state of the insurrectionist movement in the United States today. Once we discovered that the January 6th insurrectionists are from the mainstream, not just militia groups or the fringe of society, it became critical to know how widespread are the scope and drivers of insurrectionist sentiments among the US population as a whole and whether the insurrectionist movement after January 6th poses a continues risk of collective political violence.

Assessing the state of the insurrectionist movement in the United States is important. Community support for political violence has long been recognized by scholars and militaries as a crucial indicator of the risk of political violence. American military field manuals have along stressed exactly this point to our troops on active duty. US Army field manual FM 3-24, the 2006 version conducted under General David Petraeus, says: “Generating active popular support often has the greatest impact on the insurgency’s long-term effectiveness. This is the center of gravity of the insurgency.”

Why does community support matter so much? Put simply, community support makes it easy to rationalize violent action. Specifically, community support: 1) forms a pool from which violent activists typically emerge; 2) increases the legitimacy of violent actors, encouraging violence by providing a popular mandate – without which violent actors would be merely criminals; and 3) increases risk-taking by violent actors because perception of “safety in numbers.” Worryingly it also reduces willingness to provide intelligence to authorities, which means a future threat may remain undetected.

To be clear, assessing community support for political violence does not mean that America is experiencing an ongoing insurgency, terrorist campaign, or something that looks like a civil war. However, community support for insurrectionist sentiments in the United States is a factor in assessing the risk that political violence will escalate. History shows that community support for political violence acts like a mass of dry kindling that can be ignited by a trigger or spark that can lead to terrorist campaigns in Western democracies.⁴

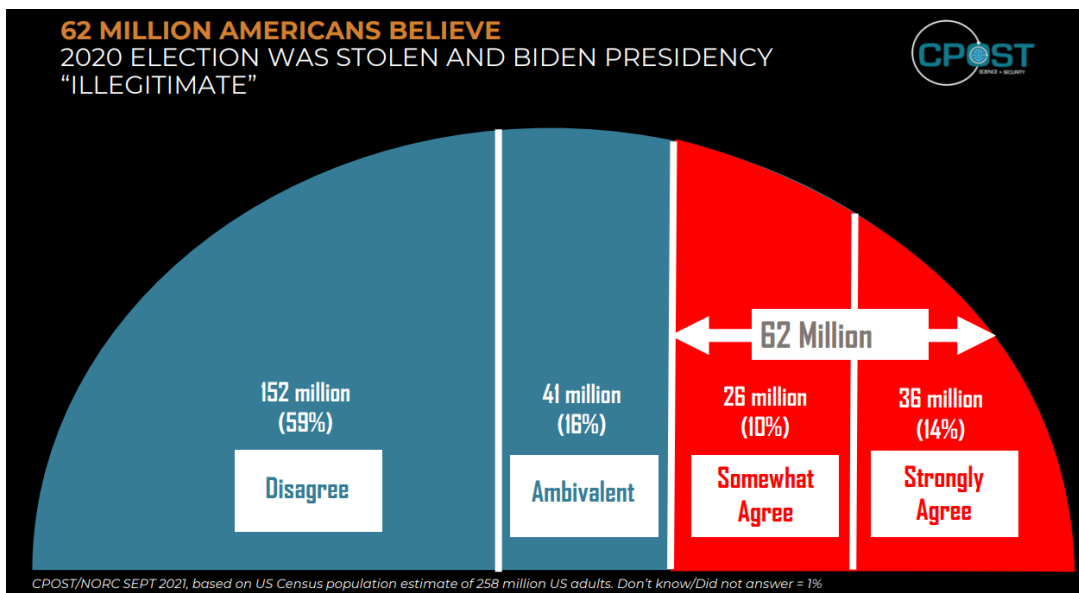
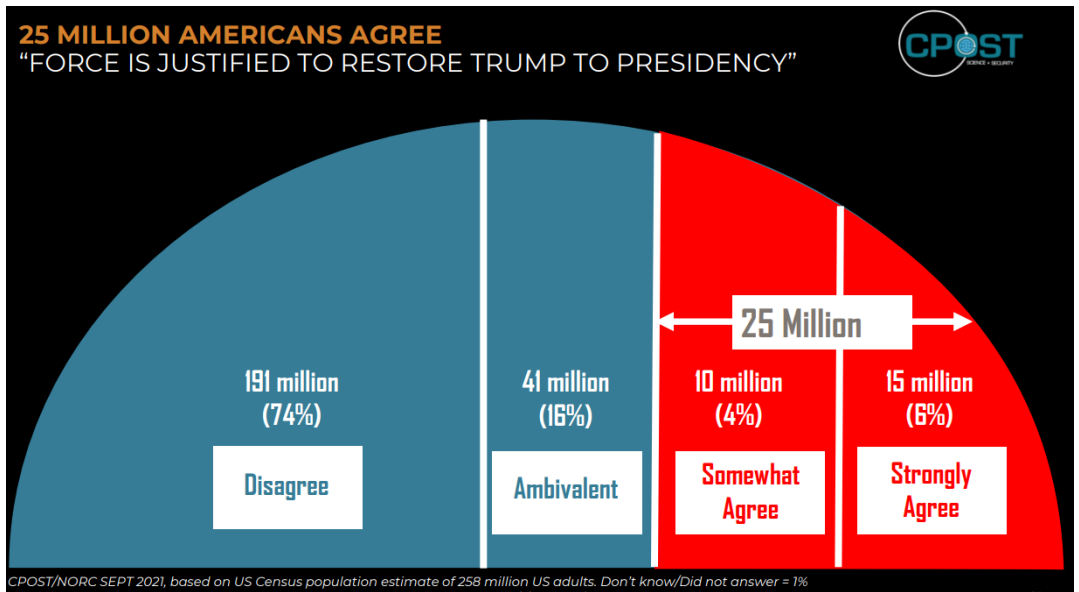
America is at a pivotal moment because credible and compelling data shows that there is a large mass of dry kindling in the country -- and we are moving into the potentially volatile 2022 mid-terms and 2024 presidential election seasons where many potential sparks could occur. To be sure, social science has not advanced to the point of predicting precisely when or where a spark will happen. However, we can track, monitor and assess the size of the mass kindling.

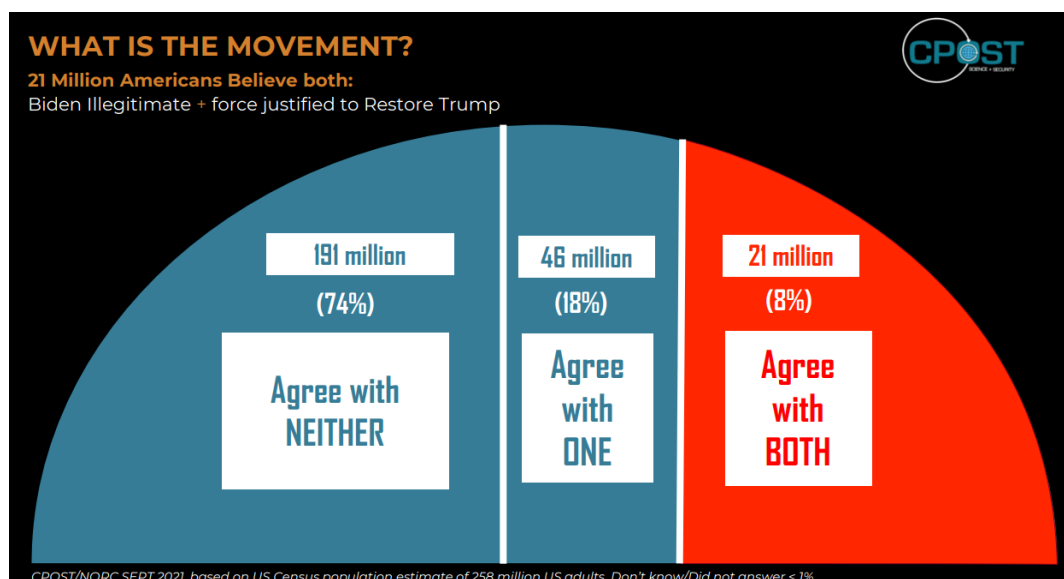
My research estimates the size of the mass kindling, that the scope of insurrectionist sentiments in America. To do this, my colleagues and I at the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats used the gold standard of national surveys – a random sample of 2,000 adults from a nationally representative panel of 40,000 Americans fielded by the highly respected National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. This allows us to extrapolate our findings to the general population, with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.9%. Our latest survey, was fielded in September 2021 – nearly 9 months after the assault on the Capitol. We have fielded three such surveys so far, and plan to conduct more.

We selected our survey questions to approximately as closely as possible the sentiments of the actual January 6 insurrectionists and then track them in the general population. Of course, we also used our knowledge as scholars of political violence about important capacities for organized violence.

Extrapolating from a random sample of 2,000 American adults, we found that an estimated 21 million people hold two radical beliefs in America today: (1) Joe Biden is an illegitimate president, and (2) the use of force to restore Donald Trump to the presidency is justified. With a margin of error of 2.9 percent, this insurrectionist movement could be as small as 13 million or as large as 28 million. At the low end, the numbers are disturbing; at the high end, alarming. In any case, the number is so large that it represents a significant part of mainstream America.

⁴ B. Hayes and I. McAllister, "Sowing Dragon's Teeth: Public Support for Political Violence and Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland," *Political Studies* 49 (2001): 901–922, tables 7-8.; A. Krueger and J. Maleckova, "Public Opinion and Occurrence of International Terrorism," *Science* 2009; H. Crida, "Public Opinion and Terrorist Strategies," *Journal of Peace Research* 2011; I. Sanchez-Cuenca, *Historical Roots of Political Violence* (Cambridge University Press 2019).





These 21 million Americans are potentially dangerous; an estimated 2 million of them have attended a protest in the past 12 months, 4 million have prior military service, and 8 million own guns. 1 million either personally know a militia member or are a militia member themselves. 6 million support militias like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, and are ripe recruiting grounds for extremist groups. Importantly, the estimated 2 million who have attended a protest in the past 12 months is political activity that constitutes an active movement, not just a set of people with latent beliefs.

To be clear, the 21 million are not now violent. However, the 21 million are a large mass movement that sees our current government as illegitimate and using force to restore Trump to the presidency as justified. They are like a mass of dry brush. They need a political trigger to ignite, but what is worrisome is the size of the mass.

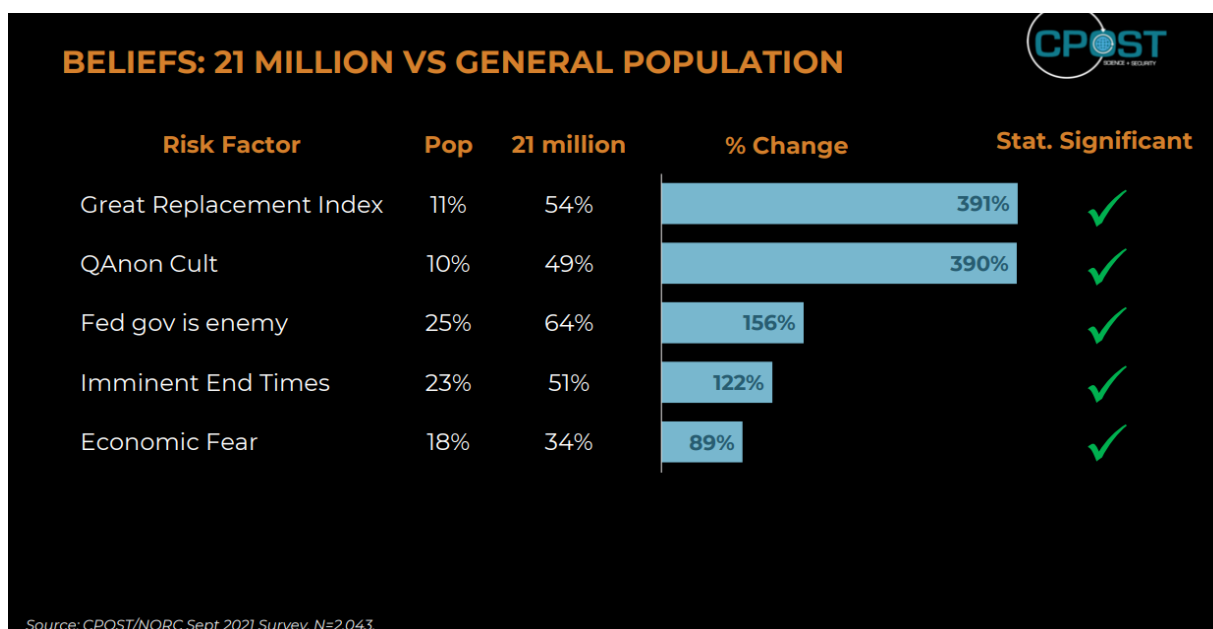
Where do they live? More than 70% live in metropolitan areas. This dovetails with our studies of the January 6 insurrectionists, which found that most live in urban areas where they are a political minority, not in the rural, reddest parts of America.

Based on our surveys, the size of the insurrectionist movement has been extremely stable. Our previous survey in June 2021 – also fielded by NORC – similarly estimated the movement at 21 million. This means that although one might have thought that emotions would calm, arrests would have a chilling effect, or de-platforming Trump would de-energize, the movement is not fading away.

Major Beliefs Driving the Insurrectionist Movement. What beliefs are driving the 21 million? Two mainly. The biggest is the Great Replacement – 75% of the 21 million agree that, “the Democratic Party is trying to replace the current electorate...with new people, more obedient voters from the Third World.” The second is the QAnon – 49% agree that, “a secret group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles is ruling the US government.”

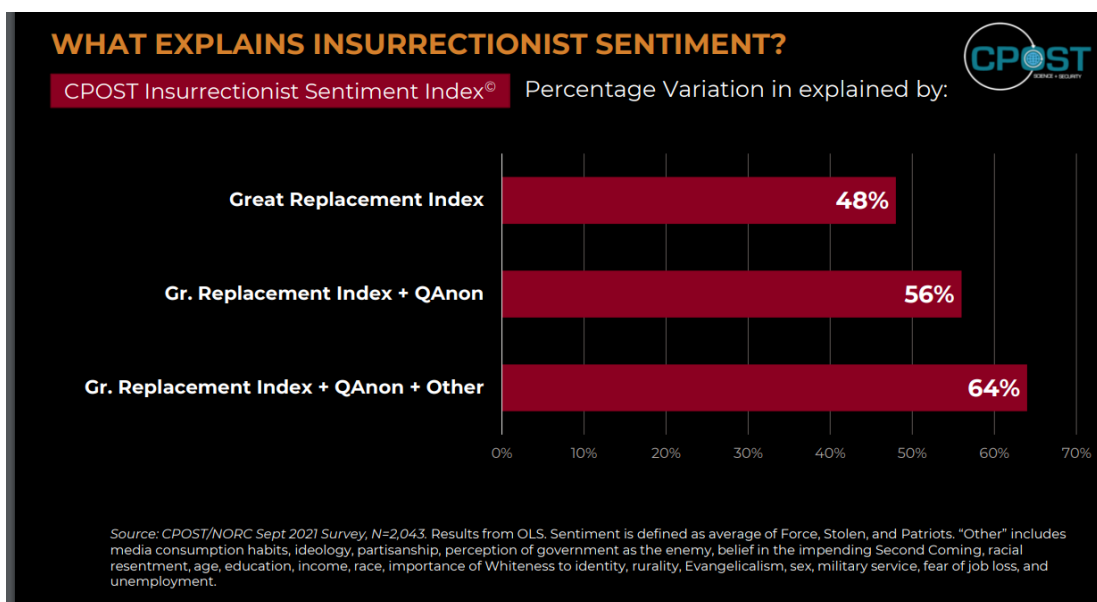


Our statistical analysis below separates factors that account for beliefs of individuals in the 21 million versus the general population. The results are important. We considered many potential drivers – such as fear of job loss, seeing government as an enemy, and belief in the End Times. Our statistical analysis shows that the Great Replacement and QAnon Cult are far more powerful drivers than these beliefs and concerns.



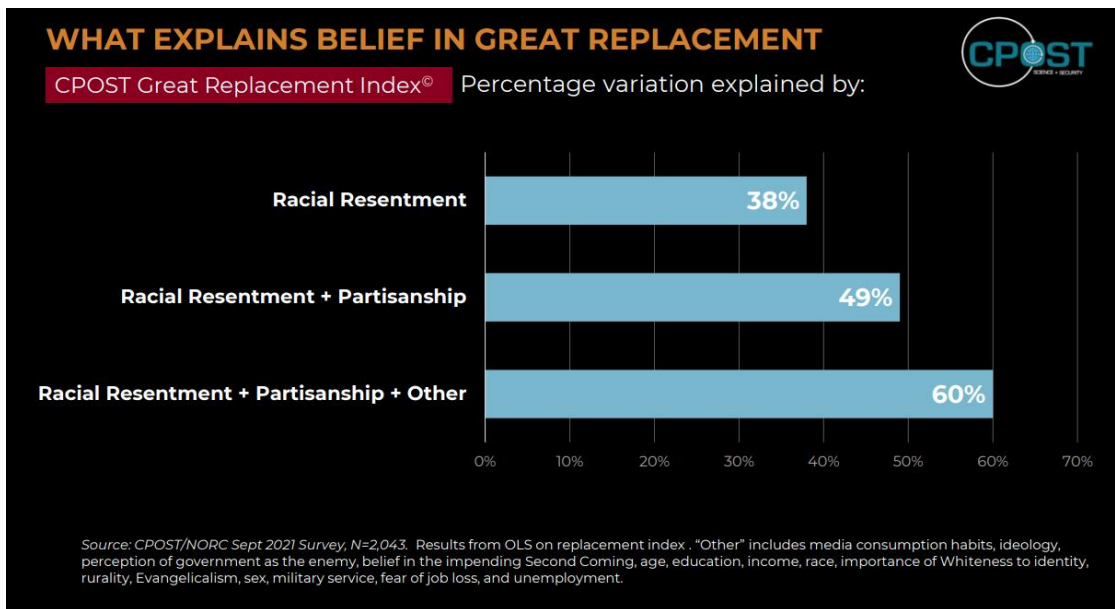
Further analysis of what statisticians' call "model fit" – an assessment of which individual factors account for *the most variation* in being in the 21 million of the insurrectionist movement versus the general population – allows us to see which factor is the bedrock belief and how much each additional belief grows the movement.

As you see in the figure below, the Great Replacement is the bedrock – accounting on its own for 48% of the variance and that adding QAnon only adds an additional 8% and adding all other factors – throwing in the kitchen sink, if you will – only adds a further 8%. This is substantial evidence that the Great Replacement is the head and shoulders leading driver of the insurrectionist movement.



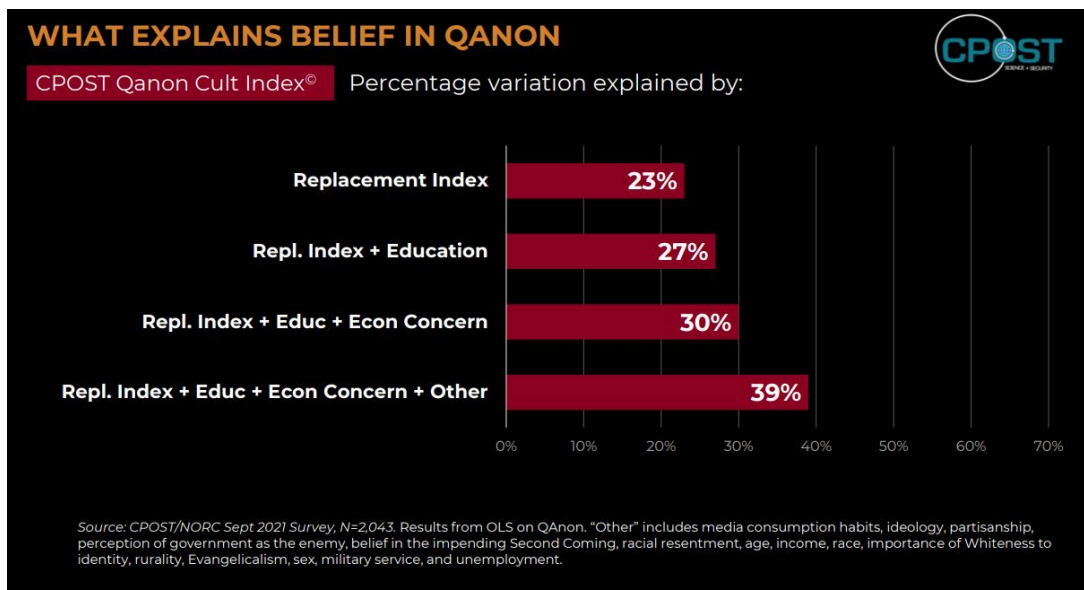
What explains why people believe in the Great Replacement? Our statistical analysis below also sheds light on that question.

The factor that accounts for the most variance between people who believe in the great replacement versus those who do not in the general population is racial resentment – specifically, resentment against minorities who get what the respondents perceive as special privileges. Racial resentment alone accounts for 38% of the variance. Adding being a Republican only adds an additional 11%, and throwing in the whole kitchen sink of factors only adds a further 11%.



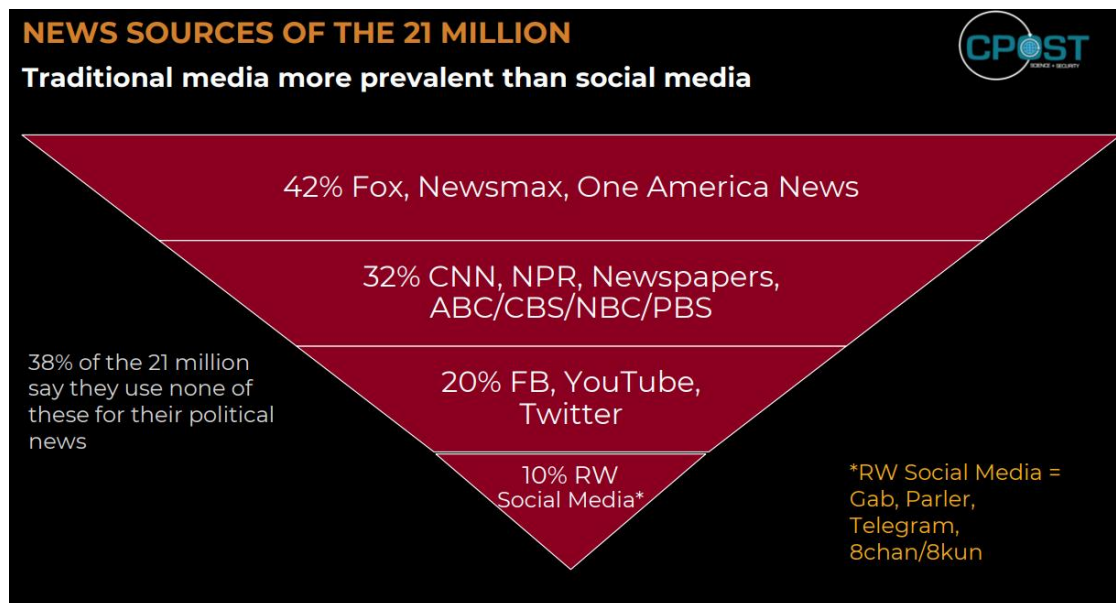
What about QAnon? The factor that accounts for the most variance between people who believe in QAnon cult versus those who do not in the general population is fear of the Great Replacement, which accounts for 23% of the variance, by far the most important single factor.

What this means is that the Great Replacement is not only the biggest individual factor driving the 21 million, but it is also the biggest indirect factor driving the QAnon beliefs among the 21 million.



Overall, our most important finding is that fear of the Great Replacement is the main driving the insurrectionist movement.

Media consumption of the Insurrectionist Movement. Traditional news sources are far more important than either social media in general or right-wing social media. Our multiple nationally representative surveys have consistently found that, of the 21 million, 42% rely on conservative traditional media – meaning Fox, Newsmax, and One America – 32% on center and liberal media – for example, NBC and CNN – while only 20% rely on mainstream social media like Facebook and Twitter and only 10% on right wing social media like Gab and Telegram.



To be sure, right-wing social media is potent. The odds of a single viewer of right-wing social media being in the 21 million is much higher than any news source. But, there are so few who view right-wing social media in the general population – only 3% -- that this accounts for only 2 million of the 21 million.

Overall, social media matters, but mainstream news media is more important within the insurrectionist movement.

Wrapping up: A mainstream movement sympathetic to the goals of January 6th continues.

So, what do our studies tell us about the movement? It is a broad mass movement with violence at its core. It is a political movement, not ordinary criminal behavior, although crimes may be committed. Members are a political minority in many places, not only centered in “red” parts of the country. And our studies find strong evidence that the fear of the great replacement is a key driver.

The January 6th assault on the US Capitol is a mainstream movement of political violence in America. The evidence based on multiple empirical approaches shows a disturbing trend: A large, active, mainstream movement sympathetic to the goals of January 6th continues to exist in America and could become a dangerous factor in the 2022 and 2024 election seasons.

What are the implications of the January 6th political logic for the future? Crucially, the political motives drove the insurrectionists and that define the insurrectionist movement today endanger democracy, because they are predicated on a clear falsehood -- as the 2020 election was not, in fact, stolen -- and on a conviction that violence is the only solution. It is belief in "the steal" that ultimately allows the insurrectionists to redefine acts of collective political violence that *harm democracy* as patriotic duty to *defend democracy*. Absent the belief in the steal, many of the January 6 ideas are surprisingly normal, such as the idea that patriotic Americans should defend America and our Constitution against subversion. This underscores how efforts that undermine the legitimacy of elections can have dangerous consequences. If rooted in falsehoods about stolen elections, patriotic counter-revolutionary motives are dangerous to American institutions precisely because they justify insurrectionary acts by those who perceive themselves as protecting America.