

London School of Economics and Political Science

**Private Defense as a Public Good: Threat, Trust, and
Emotive Pathways to Armed Mobilization in the United States**

Ariel Ann Patterson Perkins

A thesis submitted to the Department of Government
of the London School of Economics and Political Science
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London

March 2023

Declaration

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Abstract

Why do individuals feel motivated to join armed community defense groups? The proliferation of non-state armed groups across the United States (US) since the 1970s offers a puzzling case of defensive action without clearly observable threats. Given the relatively high internal security of the US, what exactly are individuals coming together to arm against?

This comparative politics research presents a qualitative case study of micro- and meso-level mobilization among firearms training and armed community defense groups in the US. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with armed group members between 2019 and 2021, I contribute new data from unsampled armed groups with divergent political orientations and constituency-based appeals (e.g., Socialist Rifle Association, Militia Movement, Pink Pistols). Building on established structural relationships identified in comparative politics, this research unpacks the worldviews and perceptions of actors at lower levels of analysis.

Through participant accounts I demonstrate how actors from varied positionalities similarly interpret salient events and structural changes as threats. Accounts in this research illuminate the importance of considering actors' perceptions of political and institutional distrust in our explanations of US armed action. I illustrate how armed group members perceive firearms preparedness as an act of public service that counteracts government failure. In providing what government cannot or will not, armed defense offers a civic-oriented and 'legitimate' way for individuals to practice and arm with the tools of violence.

Armed actors in this research illustrate how individuals perceive threat through socially situated contexts. Understanding how threat is constructed and acted upon between and within armed groups in the US offers insights for comparative political action studies of armed politics, gun wielding, and political behavior. This research suggests threat is mediated by actors' perceptions and constrained by institutional contexts that may influence how individuals decide to engage in political action. The tentative, theory-building implications unpacked in this research point to the importance of considering emotive pathways to political action, as well as how threat may heighten sentiments of not only fear, but also 'meaningfulness.'

Acknowledgements

My gratitude first and foremost belongs to my participants who generously extended their time, insights, and kindness to me. I hope that any participants reading this text find themselves reflected in its words and enjoy reading about the experiences of others. I especially want to thank Charlotte Brabant, who helped me laugh and reflect throughout my fieldwork.

This research would not have been possible without the generous financial support of the LSE PhD Studentship program. Additionally, a substantial portion of my fieldwork was made possible through a grant from the Phelan United States Centre at LSE. I am thankful for the intellectual community the Centre has created, as well as the continued guidance, resources, and opportunities the Centre provides to both affiliates and the wider LSE campus. I especially want to thank Adeola Akande and Peter Trubowitz for all of their encouragement and help since receiving the grant.

I offer my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Steffen Hertog and Bill Kissane, for their invaluable feedback, guidance, and critical engagement with my work over the years. I am also deeply grateful for the support and education of faculty and administrative members at LSE and beyond who have extended their time, kindness, and insight, especially Catherine Boone, Sumantra Bose, Fenella Canell, Sara Hobolt, Martin Lodge, Omar McDoom, Emily Metcalf, Catherine Reynolds, Livia Schubiger, Aaron Winter, David Woodruff, and, in particular, John Hutchinson. I benefitted greatly from my participation in the Comparative Politics/Comparative Political Economy workshop in the LSE Government Department and am very thankful for both the experiences and friendships formed through the series.

I owe much to Kenyon College and the many faculty members there who taught me so much beyond the classroom. I cannot offer enough thanks and gratitude to Pamela Camerra-Rowe, a source of immeasurable guidance, knowledge, and inspiration well beyond graduation; and David Leibowitz, whose intellectual curiosity and unyieldingly warm spirit continue to inspire and spur my own learning. I would not be where I am today without the help of my educators in Kentucky, and especially Penny Alderman and Mark and Virginia Etherton—thank you for all of your faith in me and for teaching me how to speak with power and a clear voice.

I especially want to thank all the friends who have been there for me throughout the years, and who are far too numerous to list here. So many of you have offered unconditional encouragement, laughter, and support, and some of you may never know how much you have inspired me. At LSE I was very fortunate to benefit from the wit and support of my fellow doctoral students. I could not envision this academic journey without the friendship of Iman Dawood, who provided so much joy, counsel, and love

throughout our time at LSE; and Temi Ogunye and Jan Stuckatz for their encouragement, humor, and the occasional pint.

I want to particularly thank Triona McBride, Julia Hartviksen, Carolin Dieterle, and Cristin Fergus—I am so fortunate our paths crossed when they did, and my memories of London during this doctorate will be forever shaped by your compassion, warmth, and brilliance; thank you so much for believing in me and sharing your lives with me. To Sasha Rockwell, Natalie West, Sophia Bunemann, and Jemma De Leon: your love, friendship, humor, and insight has sustained me through some of the hardest parts of this process. And to Amanda Berger, Bridget Ginty, Erica Turner, Negar Kalbasi, Aylara Odekova, Meghan Doughty, Janetta McKenzie, Stephanie Classmann, and the many other dear friends near and far who have been there for me through thick and thin—I cannot thank you all enough for your deep friendship and love.

Finally, but not least, I want to thank my brother, Taylor—you have brought me joy through some of the hardest parts of life and I would not be where I am today without your support, love, and confidence in my abilities. To Gabe, whose laughter and presence I give thanks for every day; to Stephanie, Katherine, and Cynda for their continued love and encouragement over the course of my life; and to my late father, Allan, who first showed me the beauty of language, and to whom I owe so much—your spirit and love continues to inspire me.

Above all this work is dedicated to my mother, Emma, who gives me strength, life, love, and hope in the darkest and lightest hours. She is my mentor and role model, and her intelligence, resilience, and humor inspire me every day. Her brilliance continues to push me to think both critically and compassionately, and it is only through her faith, guidance, and love that I have been able to achieve so much. Thank you so much, mom, this work would not exist without you.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronyms Identifying Armed Groups in this Research

III%	Three Percenter
JBGC	John Brown Gun Club
JPFO	Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership
KDLM	Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia
KSM	Kentucky State Militia
LEFT	When used in participant coding, socialist, Marxist, and other left-wing political armed groups whose names are anonymized in this study
LFM	Light Foot Militia
NAAGA	National African American Gun Association
OC	Orange County, California
ODF	Ohio Defense Force
PP	Pink Pistols
SRA	Socialist Rifle Association
TSM	Texas State Militia
VAOK	Virginia Oath Keepers

Two letter US Postal abbreviations are used throughout this text for states. E.g., Alabama is AL.

Other Acronyms and Abbreviations

AR-15	ArmaLite (semi-automatic) Rifle
ATF	US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms
BIPOC/POC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
BLM	Black Lives Matter Movement
BLS	US Bureau of Labor Statistics
DHS	US Department of Homeland Security
EMT	Emergency Medical Technician
FBI	US Federal Bureau of Investigation
FDR	Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd US President
FEMA	US Federal Emergency Management Agency
HUD	US Department of Housing and Urban Development
January 6	January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol in Washington, DC to disrupt certification of 2020 Electoral College votes
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LGBT+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, + nonbinary genders and sexualities
NFA	National Firearms Act (1934)
NFS	National Firearms Survey
NRA	National Rifle Association
OKC	Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center
SYG	Stand Your Ground Laws
Y2K	Year 2000, in particular in reference to the Y2K 'crisis' related to over-hyped fears around digital failures at the turn of the century

1. Introduction

Why do individuals feel motivated to join armed community defense groups in the United States (US)? How threat influences defensive action is more intuitive in cases where the costs of nonparticipation are visibly high (e.g., violent coercion, loss of political rights, etc.). However, the proliferation of firearms training and local armed groups across the US since the 1970s offers a puzzling case of defensive political action without clearly observable threats. Given the relatively high internal security of the US, what exactly are individuals coming together to arm against?

This comparative politics research presents a qualitative case study of micro- and meso-level mobilization among firearms training and armed community defense groups in the US to understand the underlying worldviews that potentially motivate individuals to participate in armed action. If we view political outcomes as the product of dynamic social processes, careful attention to the context in which political decisions are made, remade, and altered is imperative. The intersectionality of identities and interdependence of many micro- and meso-level mechanisms is partly what makes qualitative work so important. Qualitative understandings, alongside public data and prior scholarship, can provide a more accurate picture of how actors interpret and respond to macro-level change. Qualitative research asks how “people experience politics in the form of laws, surveillance techniques, structural shifts, and political violence” (Bayard de Volo 2009, 222). This research asks how people experience politics through armed defense.

In addition to contributing a ‘thick,’ qualitative investigation of armed actors, I also offer new data for comparative politics literature on gun owners and armed groups. Research on non-state armed actors in the US centers on politically violent white supremacist and anti-government cells, with little attention to the proliferation of armed groups across the political spectrum with nonviolent—that is, defensive—outcomes (cf. Jensen, Seate, and James 2020).

Since the height of political interest in US armed groups in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, little research has investigated the presence of newer armed groups outside the US right. I leverage the current variation in arms training and community defense groups to ask qualitative questions that previously could only be applied to a narrower set of ‘rightist’ militias and politically violent groups (cf. Melder 2014; Shapira 2013; Cooter

2013; Mariani 1998; Van Dyke and Soule 2002; O'Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Aho 1995). Through in-depth, worldview-unpacking interviews with firearms activists and armed group members, this research demonstrates how actors from varied positionalities similarly interpret salient events and structural changes as sociopolitical threats that require defensive action.

This research investigates armed defense groups with divergent political orientations (e.g., Socialist Rifle Association, Militia Movement), and constituency appeals (e.g., Pink Pistols). Armed groups in this research also range from 'open' organizations that primarily provide public-facing firearms education, to 'closed' groups focused on training tactical armed units for emergency response and defense.

I argue that understanding the worldviews of participants allows us to see the formation of defensive armed groups in the US as a type of political action partially enabled by shared sentiments of political and institutional distrust. Within my sample, firearms preparedness is connected to actors' stated perceptions that government and existing institutions do not have enough capacity to maintain internal order, provide for social welfare, and respond to future disasters. Political distrust, and its accompanying threat of societal failure, makes the act of arming meaningful and rewarding for participants, who offer defensive skills to communities unprepared or unarmed for future exigencies.

The perception that government cannot (or should not) provide internal security is paralleled in participant accounts with a belief that defense is ultimately an individual responsibility. 'Privatized' models of public defense prioritize individual responsibility for communal protection, and are structurally enabled by the emergence and effects of neoliberal ideologies in the social sphere and policing paradigms (cf. Carlson 2012, 2014, 2018, 68-69; Garland 1996, 1997; Squires 2000, 9, 28-29; Gahman 2015; Bettache and Chiu 2019; Esposito and Finley 2014; Kaplan-Lyman 2012; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018; Wacquant 2009; Rose 2000).¹ At the actor level, the neoliberal logic of security provision appears in participant discourse around individualized rights and

¹ Definitions of neoliberalism could comprise an entire dissertation. Broadly, I understand neoliberalism not just as a set of economic policies, but also as "an ideological system that holds the 'market' sacred, born within the 'human' or social sciences and refined in a network of Anglo-American centric knowledge producers, expressed in different ways within the institutions of the post-war nation-state and their political fields . . . Neoliberalism is rooted in a moral project articulated in the language of economics, that praises 'the moral benefits of market society' and identifies 'markets as a necessary condition for freedom in other aspects of life'" (Mudge 2008, 706). For a discussion of neoliberalism in relation to crime, policing, and private violence in the US, see the second half of Chapter 2.

responsibilities for armed defense and gun ownership. Rather than responding to personal fears of criminal violence, however, actors in this research perceive their armed defense primarily as protecting others from failures in government, policing, and law enforcement. It is the perception that practicing armed defense is both individually required and altruistic (i.e., communally shared) that makes the act of arms training rewarding for my participants.

While the contours of political action in this research are contextually confined to the US, understanding how threat is socially constructed and acted upon by a subset of actors offers insights for comparative investigations of political action. How is threat mediated by actors' perceptions and constrained by social context? Why do actors choose certain forms of political action over others?

This research offers at least three implications for comparative politics literature on political action and armed groups. First, this research underscores the methodological importance of considering the worldviews and interpretations of ground-level actors in political action explanations (cf. Scott 1985; Auyero 2009; Wood 2003). Armed actors in this research illustrate how individuals perceive threat through socially situated contexts unrelated to easily measurable socioeconomic grievances. Emerging comparative politics scholarship, predominantly in Latin America, investigates similar questions of why armed civilian defense groups arise in some threatened communities and not others (cf. Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub 2021). While threat and distrust are well-studied in social science literature across subfields, threat in comparative politics accounts is frequently identified through structural conditions and grievances that do not fully account for the micro-level emotional and subjective judgments behind threat formation shown to be important in prior research (cf. Almeida 2019; McDoom 2012; Fritsche, Jonas, and Kessler 2011; Jasper 2011; Turner and Stets 2005).

Second, political violence scholarship is increasingly investigating the prevalence of non-state armed groups that do not easily fit pro/anti-state classifications, and use violence to varying degrees (cf. Carey and Mitchell 2017; Staniland 2015, 2017). While frequently chronicled in conflict and civil war settings, examples of these 'pro-government' or 'defense-oriented' groups are also found within stable democracies during the 20th century, including Europe and the US (cf. Campbell and Brenner 2002, xiii). Several qualitative case studies already compare US militias to international armed groups, including Ulster loyalists (Reed 2013), Colombian paramilitaries (Weeber 2003), the politically violent right in Canada (Perry, Hofmann, and Scrivens 2020; Perry

and Scrivens 2018), and the Zapatistas in Mexico (Castells, Yazawa, and Kiselyova 1995).

Rather than conceptually comparing militias to other ‘anti-’ or ‘pro’- government armed groups, this research instead emphasizes the importance of viewing private armed groups not only in relationship to state actors, but also as situated within varied systems of violence management that may include semi-public or private armed actors. How should we conceptualize armed groups not in open rebellion against the state or who display ‘weaker ideological’ programs (cf. Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014; Schubiger and Zelina 2017)? For instance, a surprising observation of this research is that participants did not perceive their own motivations for action using the strong political, religious, and conspiracist beliefs documented in more violent groups. This research offers data on armed actors currently defined by these ‘fuzzy’ conceptual boundaries to help refine our definitions of non-state armed mobilization.

Placing armed groups that use violence to varying degrees within a wider universe of armed politics improves our measurement and comparison of different types and patterns of armed political action across and within case contexts (cf. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Gerring 2012, 2017; Staniland 2015, 2017). As this research illustrates, actors’ perceived motivations for using or refraining from political violence may also reflect political and institutional norms created by governmental regulation of who ‘legitimately’ wields violence, and who does so ‘criminally.’

Third, I contribute empirical data to research on US armed groups by sampling beyond the Militia Movement, and focusing on nonviolent armed actors. Previously unsampled armed community defense groups remain understudied and problematize existing accounts of US armed movements. For instance, how can explanations that point to the anti-government beliefs of the Militia Movement account for socialist groups that similarly adopt armed defense, but explicitly reject the individualism of the right? Are all militia groups willing to embrace politically violent strategies, or are local organizations more varied on the ground? In addition to contributing ground-level data that more accurately captures the full range of contemporary armed actors, sampling beyond the politically violent right improves the transportability and generalizability of these findings. Including armed groups outside the US right enables qualitative analysis of how armed actors within a national case context interact with other armed groups, as well as with government institutions.

In the following sections I introduce the primary theoretical and methodological considerations of this research. The first section presents the empirical puzzle of defensive arming in the US. The second section discusses findings from previous scholarship on armed action, drawing from research on both US gun ownership and the 1990s Militia Movement. While many empirical investigations of gun ownership and the Militia Movement overlap, these two evidence-based literature fields are rarely used together to understand how armed group members compare to other gun owners who do not join these groups. Third, I discuss how applying political science scholarship on the role of political trust and emotional rewards to the case of US armed groups offers new avenues for improving our understanding of armed political action in comparative politics. Finally, I review my analytical framework and research design.

This investigation builds on prior comparative politics literature and empirical accounts of US armed groups to understand how argued structural mechanisms might translate (or not) to armed actors' own perceptions, worldviews, and perceived motivations. The following section demonstrates why such qualitative work is necessary not only to unpack how structural mechanisms work on the ground, but also to unravel how previously argued mobilizers may interact with one another at the micro and meso levels.

I. The Puzzle of Defensive Arming

This research emerges from unanswered gaps in our knowledge of US gun ownership and private armed groups. I first discuss the variations and patterns in gun ownership observed among gun owners nationwide, as well as relevant, unresolved questions around individual defensive ownership. I then apply this established knowledge to the primary question investigated in this study: why do individuals feel motivated to join armed community defense groups?

The question of why individuals defensively arm arises from observed patterns in gun ownership. Gun ownership trends since the 1960s shifted from purchases of primarily recreational and sporting weapons to handguns bought predominantly for protection and self-defense (cf. Azrael et al. 2017; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 29-31, 635; Newton and Zimring 1969, 18-22; Hepburn et al. 2007; Cleveland et al. 2017,

7; Warner and Thrash 2020; Warner and Steidley 2021).² Rates of handgun ownership increased over the past six decades. Between 1969 and 1978, around 24 million new handguns were added to the private market (Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 46). In 1994 national surveys estimated that a third of the 192 million civilian owned firearms were handguns; by 2004 handguns were estimated to be around 40 percent of the 283 million privately owned arms (Azrael et al. 2017, 39).

Gun purchases are not evenly distributed across the US population. Gun owners are statistically more likely to be rural white males, hold some post-secondary education, be married, and make annual salaries in middle-income brackets (Azrael et al. 2017; Oraka et al. 2019; Hepburn et al. 2007; Saad 2020; Parker et al. 2017; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 107; Mencken and Froese 2019, 14). Surveys since the late 1960s also document the rise of superowners (Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 11). The 2015 National Firearms Survey reported that approximately half of the estimated 265 million guns nationwide were owned by just three percent of the population (Azrael et al. 2017, 43).³

US gun violence displays similarly disproportionate patterns. While white males comprise the largest share of gun owners, Black populations comprise a disproportionate share of firearms deaths (cf. Riddell et al. 2018; Oraka et al. 2019, 179; Kalesan et al. 2014; Ferdinand 2014). Gun violence is predominantly urban: half of US gun homicides in 2015 occurred in 127 cities containing less than a quarter of the national population; and the majority of gun-related suicides occur in urban areas (Aufrichtig et al. 2017; Winkler 2013, 29; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 13). While the costs of gun violence are concentrated in urban settings, gun owners are

² A 2017 nationally representative survey found 67 percent of firearms owners acquired one for self-protection (Parker et al. 2017). The 2015 National Firearms survey found that around 76 percent of handgun owners acquired one for self-protection, compared to only 31 percent of long gun owners (Azrael et al. 2017, 44).

³ Congressional funding ‘gags’ on federal gun research in prior decades hampered data collection on the US firearms stock. One of the biggest policy triumphs of the National Rifle Association (NRA) is the Dickey Amendment, which was attached to annual appropriations funding between 1996 and 2018. The amendment effectively ended federal gun research by prohibiting the publication of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data that ‘promoted’ gun control (the National Institutes of Health was included in the ‘gag order’ in 2011). The amendment also reallocated nearly the entire budget of the CDC’s unit on firearms research (cf. Rostrom 2018; Raphelson 2018; Jamieson 2013). While the NRA and some Republicans contend that the amendment never had the intention of blocking federal gun research, the effect on CDC actions and research pipelines was significant (cf. Rostrom 2018; Raphelson 2018; Jamieson 2013; Haag 2016, 392-394). Similarly, the 2003 Tiahart Amendment blocked the ATF from releasing data on guns used in crimes, including where the firearms were bought (cf. Raphelson 2018; Webster 2018). Collection of firearms data at the federal level is furthered complicated by inconsistent state-level tracking and secondary firearms markets (cf. Follingstad et al. 2016, 1098; Koper 2014).

disproportionately concentrated in the rural US (cf. Azrael et al. 2017; Saad 2020; Parker et al. 2017; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 11-12; Blocher and Miller 2018, 7-8).

Although a majority of gun owners report protection as the primary reason for acquiring firearms, gun sales are uncorrelated with crime rates, and associations between gun owning populations and personal exposure to violent crime or unsafe conditions return mixed results (cf. Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2020; Parker et al. 2017, 21-22; Warner and Ratcliff 2021, 315-16; Warner and Thrash 2020; Kleck 1996; McDowall and Loftin 1983; Carlson 2015; Gresham and Demuth 2020). If not fear of interpersonal crime, what exactly do individuals feel the need to defend themselves against?

While unravelling the contours of increasing defensive gun ownership sheds light on the rise of armed defense groups, the central question of this research requires further specification. As much as defense group members share with the general population of gun owners, the same beliefs, contexts, and demographics do not result in the same outcomes: the majority of gun owners do not join armed community defense groups. How should we conceptualize these armed groups, and how do group members interpret their actions?

I understand ‘armed groups’ to be informal (non-state) groups organized around the goal of providing community protection and/or defensive training with firearms.⁴ By definition armed groups fall outside the bounds of normatively approved channels of democratic and civic engagement, such as voting, peaceful protest, and lobbying (cf. Cooter 2013, 11). However, the armed defense groups examined here are extralegal, not illegal; that is, group actions reinforce, rather than contest, established law (cf. Bateson 2021, 927; Obert 2018).

Little nationwide data exists on the number and size of US armed groups. Militia Movement (1994-present) groups are the most consistently tracked, but only through watchdog group data.⁵ As of 2020, the Militia Movement (1994 – present) includes at

⁴ I rely on a theoretical understanding of ‘armed politics’ that places armed groups, such as vigilantes, community and civilian defense groups, gangs, and criminal networks, on a sliding scale with groups in direct contest with state authority, such as insurgencies (cf. Barnes 2017; Schubiger and Zelina 2017; Staniland 2015, 2017; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014; Jentzsch et al. 2015; Kalyvas 2015; Skarbek 2011).

⁵ Militias are defined as non-state armed groups with military-style command structures that conduct tactical exercises, often with the intention of providing protection against ‘tyrannical’ government and/or fulfilling Constitutional ‘duties’ of ‘militia,’ military, or law enforcement service (Freilich and Pridemore 2005, 529; O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998, 457; Barkun 1997, 271-272). Usage here diverges from

least 169 paramilitary style groups in 42 states (SPLC 2021).⁶ Militia groups can embrace implicit or explicit white supremacist and antisemitic narratives, and a minority of these groups are actively politically violent.⁷

However, the number of non-state groups who offer armed defense training in the US is much larger than militias. Though less observed and even less studied, many gun training and armed community defense groups exist around constituencies and political appeals at odds or opposed to the documented rhetoric of the Militia Movement. Many of these organizations formed in the past decade.⁸ The Socialist Rifle Association (SRA), currently one of the largest arms training organizations on the political left, has around 58 chapters in 35 states; the Pink Pistols, a LGBTQ+ arms training group, operates some 45 chapters in 24 states; and the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA) has around 124 chapters in 39 states and Washington, DC.⁹

While armed groups in the US differ in political orientations, constituency appeals, and organizational structures, all rhetorically express a shared belief in the intrinsic good of private armed community defense. Armed groups use discourses of community

definitions of ‘militia’ used in political violence literature (see ‘Analytical Framework and Research Design’).

⁶ Imprecise technical and conceptual understanding of what substantively ‘counts’ as a militia group has made empirical comparisons difficult and prone to measurement error (Freilich and Pridemore 2006). Federal and state law enforcement has not consistently tracked right-wing paramilitary groups (cf. Freilich and Pridemore 2006, 160). Although analytically rigorous estimates of militias are not available, a consistent source of data remains the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a watchdog group founded as a law firm in 1971. The SPLC compiles national estimates of ‘active’ militia, ‘hate,’ and ‘Patriot’ groups through annual monitoring from law enforcement, media, and militia publications and websites (SPLC 2014, 54). Data from the Anti-Defamation League and the University of Maryland’s consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) have also been used for group estimates (cf. Freilich and Pridemore 2006; O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Asal and Vitek 2018).

⁷ The true number of ‘violent’ militias—that is, groups actively planning or engaged in acts of political violence—is unknown or not publicly available. Most recently, Stewart Rhodes, the founder of the Oath Keepers—a militia organization formed exclusively for former police, military, and first responders—was indicted for seditious conspiracy for his role in the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol (Hsu 2022). Previously, the Oath Keepers asked members to covertly monitor polling stations during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, and organized to “keep the peace” during the summer 2015 wave of protests in Ferguson, Missouri over the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown (Sullivan 2016; Collman 2020; Tobia 2017). Militias also participated in the neo-Nazi and white supremacist infused “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 (Walters 2017); and in 2020 a militia group attempted to kidnap the governor of Michigan (Knowles 2020). I did not uncover any evidence suggesting my participants engaged in political violence and/or were present on January 6.

⁸ NAAGA formed in 2015; the SRA and the Rhode Island and Puget Sound John Brown Gun Clubs formed in 2017. Groups formed in the past two decades not in this study include the Latino Rifle Association (2020), Huey P. Newton (2014) and Fred Hampton Gun Clubs, and the Redneck Revolt (2016, now defunct).

⁹ The SRA count is current as of March 4, 2022: see “Local Chapters” page of the SRA website, accessed March 4, 2022 at <https://socialistra.org/chapters/>. Active chapters of the Pink Pistols were collected on February 18, 2022: see “Find A Local Chapter,” Pink Pistols website, last modified February 13, 2022, <https://www.pinkpistols.org/find-a-local-chapter/>. NAAGA chapters: see “NAAGA Chapters,” NAAGA website, accessed Sept. 3, 2021 at <https://naaga.co/chapters/>.

defense to explain the urgency of membership and the need for firearms training. Regardless of the normative content of militia appeals, nearly all empirical accounts of militia members note how they describe their membership as both a civic duty and a public service (cf. Cooter 2013, 1-11; Shapira 2013; Akins 1998, 149-150; Gallaher 2002, 149).

The surprising contours of private armed mobilization as a ‘service’ to community reflects one of the classic puzzles of political action: the role of altruism. The observation that performing public service is important for armed group members demonstrates that armed defense represents more than just a reaction to fear of stochastic gun crime. I illustrate how armed defense group members can see themselves as providing a public good to their communities because of their distrust in government efficacy. Rather than adopting anti-government missions, my participants retain a trust in civic participation and democracy writ large that compels them to provide for communities where they perceive government cannot. Firearms preparedness is perceived as an act of public service that counteracts government failure, and in providing what government cannot or will not, armed defense offers a civic-oriented and ‘legitimate’ way to practice and arm with the tools of violence.

II. Literature Review

This research is not the first to investigate why armed groups mobilize in the US, however, this question is more frequently addressed outside academia or the discipline of political science. Within academia, scholarship on defensive gun use primarily seeks explanations for the entire population of firearms owners without addressing variations that would help us understand armed group membership among a subset of these owners. The limited academic scholarship on US armed groups, on the other hand, confines analysis to the 1990s Militia Movement and border militias. Very few academic studies exist on armed groups or even gun owners outside the US right (for exceptions see Sundaresan 2020; Allen 2007; Logan and Kelly 2021; Logan 2020; Combs 2021; Tomsich et al. 2020; Conron et al. 2018; Carlson 2018; Kohn 2004; Windisch, Ligon, and Simi 2019). And while a rich body of literature exists on the history of Black armed defense groups in the 1950s and 1960s (cf. Wendt 2007; Cobb 2016), contemporary Black gun owners and defense groups remain understudied (cf. Allen 2007).

Broadly, prior political research has not sought comparisons across armed groups, studied interactions between groups, or applied scholarship on defensive gun ownership to armed political action questions. This research attempts to fill some of these gaps by unpacking the worldviews of a more diverse sample of participants not presented in existing scholarship. Rich, qualitative data is essential for informally building on and refining existing accounts of US armed mobilization.¹⁰

To leverage this qualitative, ‘thick’ research for transportable implications, I rely on well-established structural relationships from comparative politics literature on political action: relative deprivation; social resentment; and religious, conspiracist, and political beliefs (ideology). In the next sections I discuss relevant prior scholarship on US gun owners and armed groups. Existing political research answers much about US armed mobilization at the structural level, but does not yet fully account for variations and mechanisms at the meso and micro levels. As this research illustrates, many of these structural relationships necessarily overlap and interact at lower levels of analysis. After an evaluation of previous literature, I present two additional pathways forward to help refine our understanding of armed defense in comparative politics: political trust and emotional rewards from political action.

An Exceptional Case?

The simplest explanation offered for armed mobilization in prior literature is that the US demonstrates a unique proclivity for firearms due to the presence of a gun culture and traditions of individualism. Gun culture is often used pejoratively, but by definition constitutes the history of government regulation and culture around firearms, whether traditions glorify or denounce guns (cf. Springwood 2007, 15-27; Boine et al. 2020; Mencken and Froese 2019; Kohn 2004, 4; Carlson 2014; Hoftstadter 1970). More importantly, gun ‘culture’ is neither static nor universal across US history (cf. Haag 2016).

Setting aside the saturation of private arms within the US population, if one defines gun culture as popular support for firearms control, recent history demonstrates that most individuals in the US favor restricting access to guns. Public opinion surveys across the past seven decades show a majority of Americans, and even gun owners,

¹⁰ I do not engage with political psychology explanations that are unanswerable with this research (e.g., authoritarian personalities, Moral Foundations theory, Rigidity of the Right).

support firearms regulations such as background checks for private sales, waiting periods, and restricting access to expanded classes, such as those on federal watchlists (cf. Goss 2006, 5; Smith 1980; Gallup n.d.; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 237-38; Parker et al. 2017, 11-12; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 2). In 2019, Pew found 60 percent of Americans favored stricter gun control, an increase from 52 percent in 2017, and a percentage prone to fluctuation (Schaeffer 2019).¹¹

Many gun culture arguments presented in political science literature neglect such nuance by relying on theoretical assumptions based in static accounts of an ‘exceptional’ US culture. Originating from the conclusions of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835), theories of ‘American exceptionalism’ share a core belief that the US historical context is substantively incomparable to most global cases (for discussion, cf. Ceasar 2012, 8-9; Foner 1984).¹² While encompassing a variety of different historical themes and arguments, exceptionalism perspectives can be encapsulated in ideas and symbols such as the ‘American Dream’ narrative, which is argued to arise from the condition of a democratic, ‘classless,’ and ‘rootless’ society that existed from the founding of the US state (cf. Hofstadter [1965] 2008, 51; Stock 2017, 13).¹³

Political scientists and historians criticize American exceptionalism arguments for their obfuscation of the role of white supremacy and racial systems of control in US history (cf. Hannah-Jones 2021; Gershon 2016). Empirical scholarship consistently shows how ‘American exceptionalism’ discounts the role of private firearms and coercive state power in the genocidal appropriation of indigenous land and the enforcement of slavery; as well as political interest in expanding domestic arms markets (cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Haag 2016). As Eddie Glaude (2021) remarks, “the efficiency

¹¹ I use ‘American’ and ‘America’ sparingly throughout to refer to the United States, rather than the Americas. I avoid such usage unless the syntax makes this difficult, or use relates to existing scholarship (e.g., ‘American exceptionalism’).

¹² According to Tocqueville, US democracy possesses several countervailing characteristics that prevent individuals from “turning inwards” to self-interest and atomization. In modern scholarship, these ‘exceptional’ cultural traits include: the presence of civic associations (cf. Hall 1999, 419; Putnam 1995, [2000] 2020); religion, more specifically, Protestantism (Huntington 2004; Kaufmann 2002); and support for limited government (Hofstadter 1965; Stock 2017). Everything from the question of why no socialism in the US (see discussion in Foner 1984), to attitudes on immigration (Citrin and Sides 2008), to why the US evidences higher rates of religiosity (Norris and Inglehart 2004), are all claimed to stem from an ‘exceptional’ American culture of individualism (Lipset 1996).

¹³ Social mobility explanations for political behavior are hardly incomparable or ahistorical (cf. Piketty 1995; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Middle-class strain and socioeconomic anxiety, as well as civic associations (‘dark social capital’) are used to explain global cases of political behavior, including support for the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) in 1930s Germany (cf. Allen 1984; Satyanath, Voigtländer, and Voth 2017). The same can be said of religious fervor (cf. Juergensmeyer 2003, 2008; Toft and Zhukov 2015).

of American exceptionalism as an ideology; it allows us to contain our ugliness, to always narrate it in terms of the inevitable progress toward a more perfect union . . . in that sense, America's special charge protects us from the actual evidence to suggest otherwise . . .”

Exceptionalism accounts additionally undervalue the role of both human agency and institutions by failing to observe how competing narratives of nationalism emerge across time. Nationalist narratives and myths are far from unchanging, uncontested, or empirically straightforward, and actors can instrumentalize and repackage nationalist symbols and discourse over time (cf. Hobsbawm 1992; Hutchinson 2004; Ting 2008; Anderson 2016). The myth of the ‘American frontier’ and the role of guns in ‘taming’ the ‘Wild West’ is one such nationalist myth that represents a fanciful reconstruction of history created in part to sell guns at the turn of the 20th century to a consumer base unconvinced of their utility (cf. Haag 2016, xi-xxi; Melzer 2009, 30-35).

Further, political research amply demonstrates how explaining why the US failed to implement stronger gun control requires considering the role of institutions, including the electoral influence of the National Rifle Association, the strategies of grassroots movements, and state variations in regulatory policies and self-defense laws (cf. Lacombe 2019; Melzer 2009; Goss 2006; Light 2017; Cheng and Hoekstra 2013). Rather than an ‘exceptional’ culture of ‘rugged individualism,’ America’s legacy with private firearms is one shaped by colonization, white supremacy, government policy, and consumerism.

Existing cultural norms and beliefs around firearms may enable and constrain the repertoires and frames available for contemporary armed defense, but these cultural legacies cannot account for more proximate variations in either gun ownership or armed groups, such as the rise in ‘superowners,’ self-defensive purchasing habits, and the emergence of new armed groups and ‘non-traditional’ gun owners. By relying on expansive temporal and spatial scopes, ‘American exceptionalism’ cannot plausibly account for variations in armed mobilization that occurred within much smaller timeframes.¹⁴

¹⁴ As Eric Foner (1984, 70) argues when examining the question, ‘why is there no socialism in the US?’, explanations that point to indelible features of American character “almost stand outside history itself,” and thus fail to explain anything by explaining too much.

Relative Deprivation

A second structural relationship observed in political research on armed groups and defensive gun ownership is that firearms use is a response to perceptions of economic ‘precarity’ (relative deprivation). In the US, socioeconomic status anxiety is argued to account for patterns in gun ownership, the 1990s Militia Movement, and political violence—including lynchings, domestic terrorism, and social unrest (cf. Carlson 2015, 2018; Dyer 1998; Stern 1997; Vinyard 2014; Reed 2013; Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Tolnay and Beck 1995; McVeigh 2009; Perliger 2012, 98; Chandra and Foster 2005). Empirical evidence from global contexts likewise suggests horizontal inequalities between groups—whether advantaged or disadvantaged—can create incentives for political action (cf. Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Horowitz 2000).

Two theoretical observations from comparative politics literature on relative deprivation are important for investigating actors’ perceptions of armed action in this research. First, economic deprivation does not require absolute inequality or disparity between groups (cf. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Walker and Smith 2001; Pettigrew et al. 2008; Gurr 1970; Runciman 1966). Unmet material expectations can be objective (e.g., uneven economic development, unequal political access) or subjective (e.g., ‘my group is not getting its fair share’).¹⁵ Some comparative politics scholars argue that fears of potential power loss can be stronger emotive mobilizers than actual disadvantage (cf. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 41; Peterson 2001, 35-36; Berman 2021, 75). Second, actors must view economic precarity as resulting from systemic processes rather than individual misfortune.¹⁶

In empirical research, lower middle and working-class white demographics in ‘left-behind’ economies are argued to have turned to the 1990s Militia Movement to remedy material anxieties through political action (cf. Reed 2013; Gallaher 2002; Castells, Yazawa, and Kiselyova 1995; Vinyard 2014, 274-75; Abanes 1996; Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Cook and Kelly 1999; Dyer 1998; Stern 1997; Crothers 2003).¹⁷ Similarly,

¹⁵ Whether economic grievance is ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ may vary by level and unit of analysis, as well as the chosen operational measure (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011).

¹⁶ Relative deprivation is understood to result from injustice (unfair outcomes or processes) that restrict or diminish access to conditions to which an individual feels they are rightly due (‘deserve’). Unmet material expectations are argued to increase the likelihood of political action through a frustration-aggression mechanism (cf. Gurr 1970).

¹⁷ Older versions of this explanation in political science emerged from crowd theory. These accounts argued that urbanization and industrialization disrupt social systems through uneven development,

manufacturing decline and economic restructuring over the past several decades, coupled with increasing precarity from the 2008 Great Recession, is argued to explain increasing rates of defensive handgun ownership within both communities of color and white male populations (cf. Carlson 2015, 2018; Mencken and Froese 2019; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2020; Warner and Steidley 2021, 4-5).

In a study of the Kentucky Patriot movement, Carolyn Gallaher (2002) argues that the economic concerns of members are filtered through ‘cultural issues’ that misdirect blame for grievances away from political elites and onto social others, a process facilitated by the decline of unions and urban/rural socioeconomic divides.¹⁸ Actors are ‘misled’ to believe economic inequality and vanishing jobs are inevitable, but competition over resources with social ‘others’ is not. At the ground-level, actors unable to achieve dominance in socioeconomic spheres are argued to turn to intergroup divisions to create political dominance, often by seeking to limit socioeconomic competition through identification of ‘illegitimate’ outgroups.¹⁹

Journalist Joel Dyer’s *Harvest of Rage* (1998) argues that the 1990s Militia Movement resulted from sentiments of economic insecurity caused by the 1980s Farm Crisis.²⁰ Similarly, armed movements in western states from the late 1960s through the 1990s, such as Posse Comitatus and Wise Use, are sometimes attributed to federal agriculture and environmental protection policies with adverse effects on small farmers (cf. Stern 1997, 119-128; Stock 2017, 170; Perliger 2012, 27-30; Schneider 1993). For many veterans who serve in the Militia Movement, frustration with the inability to find meaningful and gainful employment after returning from service are also argued to

creating atomized individuals seeking comfort in transcendent ‘ideologies’ and organizations, such as religion, nationalism, and other exclusive communities of belief (cf. Gellner 2006; Nairn 1977). Times of economic dislocation and unemployment are argued to create higher populations of ‘rootless’ individuals seeking avenues to channel frustration and newfound free time. Continuing economic depression is argued to degrade local institutions and social capital in communities, creating conditions of competition and distrust that allow restorative ‘ideologies’ and social movements to hold more powerful appeals (cf. Freilich and Pridemore 2005, 534; Abanes 1996; Mecklin 1923, Chapter IV, 9).

¹⁸ US history documents how the white working class opted for sociopolitical status over more materially powerful cross-cutting class coalitions (cf. Foner 1984; Marx 1996). As Anthony Marx (1996, 191) summarizes, “racial domination encouraged cross-class white unity, rather than exclusive loyalty to one’s own class interests. Intrawhite conflict was diminished, and growth proceeded.”

¹⁹ Social resentment in militia and ethnonationalist movements is sometimes argued to reflect semi- or even false consciousness. Actors and elites instrumentally use social ‘othering’ to gain political power in ways that deflect attention from the root causes of inequality (cf. Gallaher 2002; Dobratz 1997).

²⁰ The Farm Crisis, brought on by large-scale changes in federal policy and the global agricultural market over a series of decades, led to a rapid collapse of agricultural banking in the mid-1980s. Small farm foreclosures and bankruptcies occurred from loan defaults and plunging land and crop prices (cf. Barnett 2000; Buttell 1989; Shepard 1986).

make militias an exercise in reclaiming lost ‘dignity’ and ‘pride’ from previously high status occupational roles (cf. Shapira 2013, 33; Belew 2018, 42).

At the structural level, Van Dyke and Soule (2002) and Freilich and Pridemore (2005) find positive associations between militia group numbers and contractions in the farming sector using county and state-level regressions. However, Freilich and Pridemore (2005) find no association between militia group numbers and general economic deprivation. Economic anxiety hypotheses for right-wing violence and militia mobilization are also subject to notable null findings, as well as conceptual measurement issues from a lack of quality, ground-level data (cf. Aho 1995; Piazza 2017; Durso and Jacobs 2013; Perliger 2012, 98; Freilich and Pridemore 2006).

Some outside scholarship examines gun carrying practices as a compensatory mechanism for masculine status loss. Individuals are argued to adopt armed ‘protector’ roles when unable to access male breadwinner status (cf. Carlson 2015, 2018; Mencken and Froese 2019; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2020; Katz and Bailey 2000; Warner and Steidley 2021, 5).²¹ As sociologist Jennifer Carlson (2015, 2018) argues, defensive gun carrying is a response to ‘economic precarity’—or generalized sentiments of economic insecurity that cut across socioeconomic classes—similar to relative deprivation.²² Mencken and Froese (2019) also find that white male populations experiencing economic distress are more likely to view defensive gun ownership as ‘empowering.’ In a test of arguments from Mencken and Froese (2019) and Carlson (2015), however, Warner et al. (2021) find economic precarity to be *negatively* correlated with protective gun ownership.

Mixed empirical findings suggest that the relationship between economic concerns and armed action is far from straightforward. Qualitative investigations such as this research therefore offer important observations for how comparative politics understands the mechanisms and beliefs that may link structural indicators to action. Understanding actors’ perceptions of their own positionality and motivations for action—both of which are necessarily multidimensional and multicausal—improves the field’s investigation of similar types of political action at higher levels of analysis.

²¹ Scholarship frequently references Nicholas Townsend’s (2002) work on the ‘packaged deal’ of American masculinity, which includes perceptions of male ‘status’ performed through the intertwined duties of fatherhood and breadwinner employment.

²² ‘Economic precarity’ captures sociological theories of ‘strain’ – mobilization by socioeconomic ‘losers’ – as well as ‘status anxiety,’ or mobilization by powerful socioeconomic groups to protect material privileges (Carlson 2015, 288; 2018, 26). In comparative politics, both of these mechanisms fall under relative deprivation (cf. Gurr 1970).

Social Resentment

Closely related to relative deprivation mechanisms and sentiments of economic precarity is a body of political behavior and comparative politics scholarship that emphasizes the structural importance of perceived social grievances and ‘resentment’ for political action. Much as economic precarity is argued to stem from conditions of competition and threat, ‘social identities’ are argued to become ‘activated’ when their dominance is challenged (cf. Jardina 2019; Omi and Winant 2015). While economic concerns are significant in these explanations, social resentment accounts emphasize competition over sociopolitical status and platforms of power, rather than competition over economic status, wealth, and advancement opportunities. Political action is instead argued to result from emotive conflicts in the social sphere over “schemes of values” and definitions of citizenship and group identity that emerge as material concerns recede from the core of political debate (cf. Hofstadter [1965] 2008, 39; Lipset 1998; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Berman 2021, 75-76).

In the US, advancements in the rights and socioeconomic power of communities of color and women beginning in the 1960s are argued to be root causes of the Militia Movement and right-wing violence (cf. Gibson 1994; Lamy 1996; Vertigans 2007; Piazza 2017, 56-57).²³ As these macro-level transitions in the post-Vietnam War era coincided with the emergence of right-wing paramilitary groups beginning in the 1970s, some scholars argue that paramilitary aesthetics arose as a way to ‘reclaim’ and ‘reassert’ white male status through hyper-masculine and nationalistic in-group bonding rituals (cf. Gibson 1994, 19; Cooter 2013, 9, 242; Berlet 2003).²⁴

²³ Social rights legally expanded beginning in the 1960s through, for instance: the end of Jim Crow; enfranchisement of Black and Indigenous Americans; expansion of women’s access to financial credit in the 1974 Equal Credit Opportunity Act; and reproductive rights through *Roe v. Wade* (1971).

²⁴ Scholarship frequently links the 1990s Militia Movement, paramilitary white supremacist groups, and increases in handgun ownership to the emergence of ‘New War’ culture and the paramilitary warrior hero beginning in the 1960s (cf. Gibson 1994; Jeffords 1988; Belew 2018; Stock 2017, 170). As presented by James Gibson (1994, 9-10), the paramilitary hero of ‘New War’ culture responded to the decline of ‘moral’ US military might abroad, and the deprivileging of white male, heteronormative ‘toughness’ at home. The modern lone warrior narrative draws on models such as John Wayne, Davy Crockett, and Rambo, all of which “presented the warrior role as the ideal identity for *all* men,” while portraying these warriors as white males (Gibson 1994, 9; Jeffords 1988). Popular paramilitarism and fantasy role-playing through ‘New War’ culture was argued to offer agentive escapism for both returning veterans and those confronting an ‘emasculating’ loss to a racialized and feminized Asian ‘other’ (cf. Stock 2017, 170; Gibson 1994, 26). The construction of paramilitary fantasy salves the collective wounds of national defeat through the creation of a ‘mythical’ male warrior that links from the Revolutionary War to the ‘American frontier’ and modern veterans. The warrior myth is a contemporary invention that falsifies continuity with the past, and engages in an active process of ‘collective forgetting’ and remembering (cf. Renan [1882] 1990; Anderson 2016; Hobsbawm 1992).

To understand how these structural forces are argued to play out at the meso and micro levels requires a brief elaboration of the mechanisms behind social resentment identified in comparative politics. First, scholarship across nearly all social science disciplines understands identity to be socially constructed, malleable (or not ‘fixed’), multifaceted, intersectional, and a product of interactional feedback between actors in society, as well as between actors and the structures that create, mediate, and institutionalize identities. On the structural level, seemingly ‘sticky’ identities such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender are not innate, but rather created and reinforced through institutional demarcations by the state (or colonial power) (cf. Marx 1996; Horowitz 2000; Omi and Winant 2015; Nascimento 2007, 9-41). The allocation of political rights through social delineations not only defines outgroups, but also constructs identities around high-status ingroups.²⁵ In short, social identities appear as an identifiable product (rather than cause) of group competition, identification, and classification (cf. Marx 1996; Fearon and Laitin 2000, 2003).

Second, precisely because identity is fluid, insecure, and unstable, even across an individual’s lifetime, political literature emphasizes how ‘pressures’ can exist to ‘perform’ identity by positively ascribing oneself to ‘markers’ that either contest or reaffirm ‘hegemonic’ (or dominant) social identities (cf. Horowitz 2000; see also, Butler 1988; Connell 2005; Taylor 2014, 9).²⁶ In comparative politics, these innate societal tensions help explain armed action through micro-level sentiments of ‘outgroup bias’ or ‘animosity,’ and related meso-level pressures for ‘ingroup bonding.’

Research on the Militia Movement, and comparative politics literature more generally, therefore emphasizes how group membership may resolve insecurities and grievances felt in wider social interactions by offering closed communities that provide a sense of belonging and camaraderie (cf. Shapira 2013; Cooter 2013, 91; Fritsche, Jones, and Kessler 2011; Kalin and Sambanis 2018). For instance, sociologist Mark Melder (2014, 625) explains active militia participation through the sense of ‘positive reinforcement’ these groups provide to individuals “who feel lost in their own worlds

²⁵ The US Naturalization Law of 1790, for instance, limited naturalization to ‘white’ immigrants, defining a category of ‘white’ in contrast to Brown and enslaved Blacks; white identity shifted over time to accommodate later waves of European immigration (cf. Jardina 2019; Omi and Winant 2015, 141).

²⁶ Thus, Simone de Beauvoir’s (1956, 273) famous statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” Judith Butler’s (1988, 522) elaboration on the performative nature of gender, such that “to be a woman is to have *become* a woman,” and Frantz Fanon’s ([1952] 2008) discussion of the Black body as an otherized object in the ‘performance of whiteness.’

and cast adrift from what they feel to be the true nature of our nation.”²⁷ The appeal of gun carrying and handgun use is similarly attributed to how “guns provide a space for men to practice and affirm their role in community and family protection” (Carlson and Goss 2017, 125; Kohn 2004, 104-107; Connell 2005, 212; Taylor 2014; Stroud 2012; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012).²⁸

Among the few quantitative studies of the Militia Movement, some scholars find correlations between the number of groups and increasing political representation of women in state legislatures (Van Dyke and Soule 2002), while other regressions testing the visibility of marginalized groups in political life return null results (Freilich and Pridemore 2005). O’Brien and Haider-Markel (1998) find positive correlations between militia group numbers and gun culture, but the same analysis by Freilich and Pridemore (2005) returned null results on similar indicators.²⁹ US survey data consistently demonstrates that attitudes on race and gender influence preferences for arms use and gun restrictions (cf. Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020; Filindra and Kaplan 2016; O’Brien et al. 2013; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012). This evidence, however, is contrasted with survey results from Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild (2019) that find identification as a ‘gun owner’ predicts gun control attitudes better than race, gender, and partisanship.³⁰

The paucity of academic scholarship on armed groups outside the US right also indirectly prioritizes the perceived grievances of white constituencies at the expense of the (albeit minority) of armed actors who *respond* to outgroup bias and targeted violence. For instance, in one of the few studies of queer gun owners available, Thatcher Combs (2022) finds firearms ownership in his sample of LGBT gun owners is motivated

²⁷ Academic recognition of the Militia Movement’s ‘ritualistic’ formations emphasize how these groups may be symbolically meaningful for participants (cf. Cooter 2013, 94-95; Shapira 2013). In adopting paramilitary ritual, militia members are argued to ‘perform’ masculinities without the sanction and judgment these identities face in the public square (cf. Gibson 1994, 116-117; Cook and Kelly 1999, 249; Freilich and Pridemore 2005, 531-532). Ritual is also important in studies of the Ku Klux Klan, which used Christian symbology and rituals not to ‘elide’ assertions of social dominance, but for quite the opposite reason (cf. Vinyard 2014, 48). A long theoretical understanding of ritual as creating moments of Durkheimian ‘collective effervescence,’ Turnerian ‘liminality,’ or Blochian ‘rebounding violence’ focuses not just on the ritual itself, but also on the role ritual plays in creating a sense of communal solidarity and social order (cf. Blee and Creasap 2010 for a discussion of ritualistic performance and bonding in white supremacist groups).

²⁸ Firearms use is argued to be an action that can enable the nostalgic romanticizing of “a less complex moral arena” where distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are clear-cut (Kohn 2004, 97).

²⁹ Gun culture is measured through state-level rates of NRA membership and Vietnam and Gulf War veterans.

³⁰ Gun owner ‘identity’ is measured through self-identification as a gun owner, frequency of shooting activities, and NRA engagement.

by disproportionate rates of violence against queer and nonbinary communities.³¹ In short, the multidimensionality of gun owner positionalities can be missed or oversimplified when scholarship centers structural analysis on social mechanisms specific to heteronormative, white gun culture. Ground-level research is a contributory next step for comparative political understanding of how structural societal pressures relate to actors' perceptions of their actions, not just within militias, but also among newer armed groups who respond to the targeted violence and political attacks levelled against their communities.

Religious, Conspiracist, and Political Belief Explanations

Comparative politics research on political action also emphasizes the role of fundamentalist, conspiracist, and 'extremist' political and religious beliefs. Theoretically, political or religious beliefs (or ideology) are essential for political action because notions of justice are essential to the conceptualization of 'grievances': problems must be viewed as politically imposed, otherwise these experiences are unalterable (fate) or personal (non-systematic), neither of which can be rectified through political participation. Beyond enabling action, some scholarship suggests political and religious belief serve additional functional purposes.

First, as a structuring set of beliefs with normative implications, political, religious, or conspiracist lenses can enable and constrain political action by directing which goals, strategies, and organizational structures groups and individuals decide to pursue (cf. Aho 1995, 219; Asal and Vitek 2018, 76-77; Juergensmeyer 2003, 2008; Schubiger and Zelina 2017; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014). For instance, Kathleen Belew (2018, 63) argues that despite a similar influx of veterans following the Vietnam War, pacifist beliefs prevented groups on the political left from embracing paramilitary formations in the 1970s. Political and religious beliefs are also argued to reinforce the practices, rituals, and symbols groups draw on to sustain membership and appeal to the public. For instance, US armed groups use political cues by adopting names such as the Socialist Rifle Association and the Minutemen (a reference to armed civilian units in the Revolutionary War).

³¹ Queer, nonbinary, and transgender individuals face disproportionate rates of private violence and harassment in the US (cf. FBI 2020; Combs 2022, 61-62; Conron et al. 2018, 2). Combs (2022) finds that LGBT gun owners feel isolated from wider queer rights movements that promote nonviolent and systemic responses to private violence, rather than individualized armed self-defense.

Second, political and religious beliefs may shift how actors perceive costs and benefits, and which events actors view as ‘political’ and as threats. Fundamentalist, extremist, and conspiratorial lenses, for instance, are argued to frame politics in zero-sum terms that heighten incentives for preemptive or violent action (cf. Juergensmeyer 2003; Rottweiler and Gill 2020). In this section I review belief-oriented research specific to gun ownership and the Militia Movement, focusing first on the argued influence of religion and conspiricism. Second, I discuss how hyper-partisanship and extremist political beliefs are argued to motivate armed action.

Fundamentalism, Religion, and Conspiricism

Prior scholarship documents the importance of a Christian interpretation of US nationalism within the 1990s Militia Movement (cf. Aho 1995; Akins 1998; Barkun 1997; Gallaher 2002, 106-107; Cook and Kelly 1999, 245-146).³² Research on gun owners similarly demonstrates a relationship between firearms ownership and Protestantism (cf. Yamane 2016; Little and Vogel 1992; Vegter and Kelley 2020; Young 1989; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 12, 108). Prior political science studies explain the observed connection between firearms ownership and religion, as well as the prevalence of conspiratorial belief in militias, through three mechanisms: the dualistic assignation of blame; distrust of centralized authority; and ingroup cohesion and policing.³³

First, both religion and conspiricism are argued to help resolve anxiety over misfortune and complex socioeconomic transitions by explaining change as the work of deliberate agency (cf. Barkun 2013; Moore 2016; Hofstadter [1965] 2008; Lipset and Raab 1971, 13-15). Socioeconomic failure is not down to personal fault if the US government is manipulated by outsiders to plunder from certain groups, or if sinners condemn the country to damnation (Barkun 2013; Hofstadter [1965] 2008; Lipset and Raab 1971; Juergensmeyer 2003, 2008).³⁴

Much research on conspiricism originates with Karl Popper’s (1966, 94-99) remarks in *The Open Society and Its Enemies Vol. 2* (cf. Moore 2016; Clarke 2002;

³² Protestantism appears in nationalist founding myths portraying the (white) frontier settler as a Christian missionary forging civilization in opposition to the perceived ‘savagery’ of Indigenous Peoples and slaves (cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Lamy 1996, 261).

³³ I understand religion in this research to function as an ‘ideology of order,’ per Mark Juergensmeyer (2003), Clifford Geertz (1973, 90), and Émile Durkheim (1915, 47).

³⁴ As Barkun (2013, 178) notes, “conspiricism is, first and foremost, an explanation of politics.” Juergensmeyer (2003, 2008) similarly discusses how religion can diagnose political problems in ways that offer ready-made solutions for ‘redemption.’ Normative political order in both instances is restored by identifying and removing the singular ‘causes’ of disorder: conspirators or sinners.

Keeley 1999). Popper (1966, 94) defines the ‘conspiracy theory of society’ as “the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.” The enemy in conspiracy theories is often foreign and/or ‘intellectual,’ and blame for structural inequalities is misassigned to outgroups (cf. Moore 2016, 8-9; Fenster 2008; Barkun 1997, 2013). By ascribing causal agency where none exists, conspiracists are said to make a “fundamental attribution error” (Clarke 2002) and stand as “the last believers in an ordered universe” (Keeley 1999, 123).³⁵

By assigning normative intentions to enemies’ actions in dualistic terms (i.e., ‘good’ versus ‘evil’), the worldviews of some fundamentalist religious and conspiracist beliefs are also argued to reduce incentives for political compromise, and encourage political violence (cf. Barkun 1997, 2013; Aho 1995; Akins 1998; Juergensmeyer 2008, 2003).³⁶ For instance, in a study of Idaho militias who adhere to Christian Identity beliefs, sociologist James Aho (1995, 219) identifies a fundamentalist mindset among members, often acquired through childhood socialization, as an enabling precondition for militia mobilization.³⁷ Therefore, both religion and conspiracy may offer explanations for socioeconomic changes which necessarily intertwine with and help construct the grievances identified in relevant relative deprivation and social resentment research from comparative politics.

³⁵ *Selected definitions of conspiracy from political behavior:* Oliver and Wood (2014) conceptualize conspiricism as a framing political discourse that attributes blame to actors in a cosmic battle of good and evil hidden from the public; Keeley (1999, 116) defines conspiracy as “a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret”; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016, 58) define “conspiracy as a secret arrangement between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets, or illicitly cause widespread harm. We define *conspiracy theory* as a proposed explanation of events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good.”

³⁶ Powerful beliefs with the ability to ‘transcend’ death (e.g., religion and nationalism) are argued to enable extraordinary political actions, such as self-sacrifice, by turning adherents into soldiers fighting a cosmic battle of good versus evil (cf. Juergensmeyer 2003, 2008; Atran 2016; Anderson 2016; Kedourie 1971).

³⁷ Christian Identity first emerged in the 1930s US and is “a religion of millenarian antisemitism” originating from British-Israelism, or the belief that Jesus Christ was Aryan and that the ‘chosen people’ of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel are Anglo-Saxon. British-Israelism was modified to the US context by identifying America as the ‘promised land’ founded by the British tribes (Barkun 1997, 70-71; Hoffman 2006, 109-115). As an antisemitic belief system, Christian Identity overlaps with New World Order conspiracies, which are discussed in Chapter 5 (cf. Barkun 1997, 2013; Juergensmeyer 2008; Zeskind 2009).

Second, religious and conspiratorial views may incubate distrust of authoritative sources of knowledge, such as scientific, educational, and governmental bodies (cf. Moore 2016, 5; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2018, 768; Barkun 1997, 249; Chan 2018). For instance, the contents of some antisemitic and anti-globalist conspiracies suggest citizens should fear government, and are argued to encourage individuals to engage in increasingly radical actions to protect themselves from apocalyptic circumstances (cf. Barkun 1997, 257-74).

Finally, religious and conspiratorial belief can be an effective mechanism for screening recruits, building trust, and sustaining membership. Conspiracies and myths that defy scientific reality can act as a ‘shibboleth’ for membership by requiring public avowal of mistruths (cf. Barkun 2013; Harari 2018). In this sense, belief functions as an ingroup policing mechanism similar to other group ‘markers.’

However, some evidence suggests that religious beliefs in particular are not compelling explanations for contemporary militias. The intentional ‘mainstreaming’ of the more explicit racist and fundamentalist religious rhetoric of the early 1990s militias was successful in attracting members with more diverse political motivations than the initial Christian Identity and white supremacist cadres (cf. Melder 2014, 612; Belew 2018, 192-194; Barkun 1997, 271-290; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 295-297). There is also some evidence that the religious correlation with gun ownership may be a spurious one with white males. In a study of firearms owners, for instance, Mencken and Froese (2019, 18) find higher levels of religiosity *decrease* how ‘empowered’ an individual feels from gun ownership.

When Aho (1995, 209) studied militias in the 1990s, he found these groups were popular partly because they held a monopoly on defensive arms training: “The patriots before us enlisted in the movement in a manner resembling the rational consumer in a monopolistic political market . . . [choices were] structurally limited beforehand by the parameters of the situations in which they found themselves . . .” While arguably the case in the 1990s, as of 2022 the market of groups offering arms training and community defense is more diverse, and not yet explored in rigorous qualitative research. In the next section I discuss how ‘extremist’ political beliefs are similarly argued to frame politics in dualistic lenses that encourage action.

Political Beliefs

Political behavior accounts also suggest that the Militia Movement and gun ownership may reflect shifts in national political rhetoric that create opportunity windows for armed entrepreneurs. While the vast majority of those in populist or right-wing social movements are unlikely to join armed groups, surges in right-wing popular appeal are argued to legitimate and strengthen ‘extremist’ or highly polarized fringes (cf. Vertigans 2007; Appelrouth 2017; Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 33-34). The presence of armed ‘extremist’ waves throughout US history, such as the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, appears to reinforce arguments that favorable national political climates help explain variations in armed mobilization (cf. Gurr 1980; Bennett 1995, 7). However, some research finds no relationship between militias and favorable party control, and some results suggest that opposition control of government is a stronger predictor of militia group numbers and the incidence of political violence. At minimum, these structural results cast doubt on the argument that political party control displays simple relationships to ‘fringes’ (cf. Freilich and Pridemore 2005; O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Piazza 2017).

At the micro level, armed defense is also argued to represent a form of hyper-partisanship, hyper-polarization, or extremism that frames politics in zero-sum lenses much like religion and conspiricism.³⁸ Some political behavior scholarship suggests highly engaged actors may also be more likely to view politics as high stakes, be more polarized, or express stronger preferences for security, certainty, and dualism (Abramowitz 2010; Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017; Malka et al. 2014; Singal 2018). The Militia Movement in particular is argued to be an extremist manifestation of political beliefs connected with popular sovereignty, libertarianism, and radical localism—predominantly rural belief systems that argue for decentralized authority at the local or state level (cf. Chaloupka 1996, 162; Stock 2017; Weeber 2003, 167).

As Michael Barkun (1997, 272) explains, the origins of the 1990s militias lie in “radical localism, the belief that local governmental units, usually the county or township, are the most fundamental and legitimate units of government. Hence, they

³⁸ At the structural level, Bennett (1995 xvi) notes how shifts in the core grievances of right-wing extremist groups in the US are causally tied to national politics and coincide with what have become mainstream issues for the Republican Party: gun control, equal rights, abortion, and social welfare spending. The transition of the US gun debate to discourse with connotations of social moralism was in part fueled by societal backlash to President Lyndon Johnson’s 1960s ‘Great Society’ programs (cf. Ellis 2012, 74-85; see also Chapter 2).

must take responsibility for their own defense.” For instance, members of the Sovereign Citizens movement declare themselves free ‘sovereigns’ from the US government, and instead adhere to ‘natural’ law (cf. Chaloupka 1996, 172; Matza 2020). However, while some Sovereign Citizens join militias, plenty of others do not, and some do not even own guns. Empirical studies of the Militia Movement similarly document highly local and diverse beliefs within and across groups, a state-of-play that can lead to leadership splits, defections, and even group disbandment (cf. Freilich and Pridemore 2006, 153; Gallaher 2002, 110; Mariani 1998; Chermak, Freilich, and Shemtob 2009, 1312-1313; see also Chapter 5).³⁹

Qualitative research may improve our understanding of how programmatic beliefs relate to political action. As many qualitative studies of militias from outside the discipline attest, members offer critiques of political corruption and government policy that cut across established political lines. In his study of the Arizona Minutemen, Harel Shapira (2013, 16-18) finds the interpretation of militias as ‘right-wing’ conceptually unhelpful. His Minutemen hold beliefs not easily mapped to a political scale, including anti-neoliberal perspectives shared with left-wing peers (see also Stock 2017, 3; Vinyard 2014, 2-3). Shapira’s conclusion is not that militias are misclassified as ‘rightist,’ but that a focus on explaining militias by political program misunderstands the roles and purposes these groups serve for their members (and thus the full causal story). If localist, libertarian, and individualist beliefs are argued to drive armed mobilization, why would armed groups form around socialist and communitarian frames, such as the Socialist Rifle Association and the John Brown Gun Club? At minimum the field needs a more expansive and nuanced accounting of what beliefs exist within armed groups outside of militias and the US ‘right.’

This literature review demonstrates how existing research on US armed mobilization within comparative politics does not yet account for the current armed landscape, and does not yet offer complete answers to the puzzle of collective defensive arming. In the next section I present scholarship from political science currently unapplied to the context of US armed groups.

³⁹ For instance, in compiling a list of political beliefs in the Militia Movement, Berlet and Lyons (2000, 289) include: “militant right-wing gun rights advocates, anti-tax protestors, survivalists, and far-right libertarians”; Sovereign Citizens; “white racist, antisemitic, or neo-Nazi” groups; fundamentalist religious ideologies, such as Christian Identity, Dominionism, Reconstructionism, and millennialism; radical localists and anti-environmentalists; and the “confrontational wing of the anti-abortion movement.”

Addressing Theoretical Gaps

Existing empirical scholarship on private arms use in the US focuses on either the general population of gun owners or on the Militia Movement, leaving gaps in our collective understanding of the substance, contours, and motivations for defensive arming in the US. Political science research identifies several factors related to political action that are currently unapplied to US armed group armed mobilization research. Probing qualitative investigation, in this instance, is an important first step in developing these variables for further study in comparative politics. In this section I review these new research avenues in two parts.

First, while political distrust is frequently observed among militia members, these sentiments often are not seriously examined, or are only applied to politically violent actors. Yet, national surveys show political trust levels may be correlated with gun ownership across the US population (Jiobu and Curry 2001). Comparative politics accounts likewise suggest that actors resort to 'non-traditional' political behavior through prior experiences, and/or beliefs in the inability to affect politics and policy through established institutional channels.

Second, comparative politics research points to the importance of the emotional rewards activists receive from affirming a sense of 'dignity' through political action. Studies of gun ownership similarly suggest that individuals may find defensive gun wielding appealing because of the empowering perception that one can protect oneself in an emergency. While militia members' rhetorical appeals to 'service' are often observed in empirical accounts (cf. Shapira 2013; Cooter 2013), more often these narratives are viewed as a cover for more nefarious intentions, or are not analyzed in perspectives transportable outside militias or within comparative politics.

Political Trust

As Charles Tilly (1969, 10) notes in an overview of violence in Europe and the US, many protests in the modern era grew from collective power struggles that critiqued authorities' "failure to meet their responsibilities," and were "informed by a sense of justice denied to participants in the protest." Modern armament for self-defense, whether individually or collectively, is similarly tied to distrust in government and notions of collective justice. Private gun use challenges state capacity directly by distributing the means of violence across society, and indirectly by demonstrating a lack of faith in

government capacity to police internal violence. Today, private firearms, for many gun owners and armed groups, represent a pessimistic belief that government and police cannot be one's last line of defense.

Political trust across two dimensions may help refine explanations of US armed action. First, trust levels mediate actors' perceptions of state capacity. If one believes government bureaucracy is ineffective, for instance, it is likely one would take this belief into account when assessing government's ability to protect communities from private violence. Second, recognition of corruption and illegitimacy in policymaking processes (i.e., procedural justice) may incentivize non-traditional political action (cf. Klandermans 2013, 5-6; Tyler and Smith 1995). Research on distrust focuses on the erosion of actors' faith in the institutional mechanisms and safeguards of government. Worldviews and beliefs stemming from distrust are distinct from—albeit related to—actors' perceptions of inequality in public resource disbursement, which need not carry notions of perfidy or ineffectiveness. The unfair allocation of government resources can be rectified in a Congressional budget with new political leadership; systemic corruption, on the other hand, is much harder to change through elections.

Some accounts of political action suggest attitudes about how government works (process) are more important than policy outcomes in public evaluations (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Dyck, Pearson-Merkowitz, and Coates 2018). Past experiences with the state and its representatives inevitably shape actors' assessments of other government institutions. For instance, individual encounters with policing appear to influence wider perceptions of procedural justice and legitimacy (cf. Jackson et al. 2012). While there are mixed findings about the connection between gun ownership and actual crime victimization, many surveys and much qualitative work finds significant correlations between preferences for gun ownership and fear of crime, or low confidence in policing (cf. McDowall and Loftin 1983; Kahan 1999, 452-455; Primm, Regoli, and Hewitt 2009, 67-68; Felson and Pare 2010, 1360; Kohn 2004, 128).⁴⁰

Higher levels of political distrust are also argued to dampen support for government spending on public goods, and to increase support for non-traditional or 'populist' party candidates (cf. Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Hetherington 2005; Dyck, Pearson-

⁴⁰ Fear of crime intersects with racial attitudes, not least due to the deliberate coupling of gun crime with black 'criminality' in policy, culture, and politics, e.g., Richard Nixon's 'Southern Strategy' (cf. Omi and Winant 2015, 191-197; Cooper 2015; Primm, Regoli, and Hewitt 2009, 67-68; Filindra and Kaplan 2016; Warner and Steidley 2021; Warner and Ratcliff 2021; Mendelberg 2001).

Merkowitz, and Coates 2018; Peterson and Wrighton 1998). Survey evidence suggests trust in government is at all-time lows, witnessing a decline since the 1960s that cuts across party and racial lines and matches trends in other industrialized ‘Western’ democracies (Dalton 2005; Pew 2021; Hetherington 1998, 2005; Peterson and Wrighton 1998; Lipset and Schneider 1983, 399-340).

A study of a leadership split in the Michigan Militia over paramilitary tactics further supports the importance of considering political trust in accounts of armed action. Political scientist Mack Mariani (1998, 137) identifies two mechanisms that help explain militia leader strategies: ‘normlessness’ and ‘powerlessness.’ ‘Normlessness’ is a perceived breakdown of the rules of society and political institutions, while ‘powerlessness’ is a perceived inability to affect the decisions of government. Both normlessness and powerlessness are forms of political alienation based in perceptions that citizens cannot affect change, and that political elites “either do not know how to behave or, as is more likely, are always knowingly flouting the rules” (Stoker and Evans 2014, 28).

Emotive Pathways: Empowerment and Pleasure of Agency

Studies from comparative politics research may also help resolve some questions around armed action through the observation of ‘emotions’ as mediating variables in mobilization (cf. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 44-48). Meso- and micro-level studies observe how actors across varied contexts express desires to affirm a sense of honor, dignity, pride, or self-respect through ‘altruistic’ action. An elaboration of this mechanism appears in Elisabeth Wood’s (2003, 18-19) description of ‘pleasure of agency’ as a political action undertaken out of “pride, indeed pleasure, in the successful assertion of their identity and interests.” Comparative politics research on activists of all stripes similarly supports the importance of normative concerns for spurring mobilization, as well as the accompanying emotional rewards received by actors for standing up for what is ‘right’ and taking action on behalf of others (cf. Della Porta 1995, 148; Klandermans 2021, 231; see also, Jasper 2011; Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Tougas and Beaton 2001). Is defensive arming an action one pursues in part because it reflects an idea of what they think a ‘good’ person would do?

In a 2017 nationally representative survey, Pew Research Center found that 74 percent of gun owners felt private firearm possession was essential to personal freedom (Parker et al. 2017, 30), and a Mechanical Turk survey by Warner and Ratcliff (2021,

323) found that over a third of respondents felt owning guns was “essential to their sense of freedom.” Mencken and Froese (2019) observe that gun ownership is perceived as a “morally and emotionally” restorative form of empowerment among white males facing socioeconomic distress. Abigail Kohn (2004, 61-63) similarly finds sport shooters associate arms training with a sense of ‘civic responsibility’ tied to democratic rights.

These preliminary observations illuminate how defensive mobilization may reflect higher levels of political activism, even if grounded in individualist ideas of security provision. As qualitative accounts of the Militia Movement argue, militaristic rituals offer ways to fulfil roles of armed defense and civic responsibility that often cannot be obtained in other aspects of life (cf. Shapira 2013, 53; Cooter 2013; Rosenblum 2000, 248-249).⁴¹ In the US, guns represent white male status, but this cultural overlay is set atop a more fundamental status that emerges from the ‘legitimate’ wielding of violence in a state. The idea of being armed independently from state security may be a question of moral dignity as much as practical need.

This observation extends well beyond US gun ‘culture.’ Revolutionaries across the world face asymmetrical odds against authoritarian states for more than tactical hope of success. Guns are symbolic equalizers in part because of how non-state actors use these tools to gain legitimacy through violence that mirrors the power of the state (cf. Levinson 1989, 657; Kohn 2004, 145; Juergensmeyer 2003). As Springwood (2007, 20) elaborates, “having guns, lots of guns, with ammunition, is a persuasive form of symbolic capital.” The prevalence of private ownership should not dissuade evaluations of how US armed groups use weapons to achieve ‘status’ and convey political messages similar to other armed actors in global contexts. Thus, while the precise case contours of the US context, and indeed any national context, are not directly transportable, the potential mechanisms identified around arms use here offer testable implications for future research.

In this section I briefly reviewed how the observation of actors’ perceptions of political distrust and emotive rewards for political action may offer promising inroads for understanding the micro-level worldviews and motivations behind US armed

⁴¹ Some research attributes the overrepresentation of veterans in militias to actors’ longing for a return to life filled with duty and purpose (Cooter 2013; Shapira 2013). Rather than service to the country as a hypothetical, ‘performing’ armed defense is argued to create “a concrete representation of an abstraction” (Cooter 2013, 94-95). These militaristic rituals also outwardly affirm that one’s actions are understood as ‘patriotic.’

mobilization. As presented throughout this research and the next section, understanding how actors' interpretations of threat mediate mobilization into armed groups at the ground level is crucially important for explaining armed action at higher levels of analysis. To do this in the US case requires updated qualitative research that considers the wider set of armed actors now in operation.

III. Analytical Framework and Research Design

In this section I present the analytical framework and research design of this study. I first review theoretical considerations around the choice of a micro- and meso-level qualitative investigation, and further discuss why more interpretative research is needed to expand our understanding of what threats actors mobilize around, and why individuals feel motivated to join armed groups. Second, I specify the scope of this study and briefly discuss key terms. Third, I summarize the analytical framework and the observations from prior literature built upon and considered in this research. I finally discuss the research design and the related pragmatic and methodological choices made around interviews, field observations, and triangulated data.

A. Objectives and Approach

The previous literature review produced important observations, but also demonstrated gaps in current comparative politics research on US armed groups. Prior scholarship that investigates armed mobilization across groups and gun owners operationalizes indicators that cannot explain why these same conditions only motivate a subset of actors to join armed groups. As Abigail Kohn (2004, 5) argues, "numbers do not present a window into how gun enthusiasts actually think and feel about their guns." More broadly, among studies of politically violent actors, a surprisingly small percentage offer empirically rigorous engagement with qualitative interview data (Smith et al. 2021).

At the same time, 'thick,' qualitative investigations of armed groups outside militias are lacking, and very few studies consider armed actors who are not actively engaged in political violence (cf. Jensen, Seate, and James 2020; Keatley and Marono 2021; Ahmed and Lynch 2021; Doering, Davies, and Corrado 2020, 2-3). Updated, ground-level research is needed: to account for the changing sociopolitical climates in which armed groups now operate; to document the increasing diversity of organizations on the

ground; to trace interactions between armed actors and their groups; and to understand how actors perceive government, as well as other groups.

To obtain rich qualitative data for these interpretivist goals, my sample is necessarily small. During my fieldwork I did not seek to create a ‘natural lab’ or run a ‘field experiment’ to establish rigorous causality. However, this does not mean I do not consider relevant structural variables in my analysis, as the prior literature review illustrates. One of the benefits of qualitative research is its proximity to ground-level actors and events, which can contribute to collective theory building by illuminating unobserved variables, and by problematizing assumed conceptual distinctions and relationships (cf. Schatz 2009; Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004; Allina-Pisano 2009; Gerring 2012). Qualitative evidence can elaborate causal pathways and mechanisms, informally confirm or cast doubt on existing explanations, and improve our understanding of how agency mediates outcomes.

The focus of this research is on actors’ beliefs and perceptions. By understanding why participants feel they were motivated to join armed groups, this research *informally* considers previously hypothesized relationships between structural indicators and meso- and micro-level mobilization. Do actors on the ground perceive their own actions and motivations as prior scholarship predicts? This qualitative research unpacks, questions, and refines proposed mechanisms and pathways argued to influence armed mobilization by investigating actors’ motivations, contextual understandings, and membership timelines. Observational data can note which political beliefs and elite discourses are not adopted or embraced by armed group members, as well as identify the consistent ‘threats’ actors reference and prioritize (cf. Lichterman 1998).

This study asks how political understandings and worldviews on an actor level might translate to political action. What threats, social dynamics, and perceptions are actors on the ground responding to that make armed action personally urgent and appealing? What are participants’ motivating beliefs and experiences, and are these concerns shared by more politically diverse armed actors?

High-quality, ground-level data is also needed to inform the direction of future data collection. Even if a researcher wanted to assess established correlational relationships, rigorous data for such empirical testing does not yet exist in the US case.⁴² In many

⁴² A paucity of data on armed groups is coupled with limited systematic tracking of firearms dispersion in the US population, a policy landscape shaped by NRA lobbying efforts (see fn 3).

cases participants remain the best source of information about armed group numbers on the ground. As a result, scholarship on militias and other armed actors suffers from conceptual mismeasurement (Freilich and Pridemore 2006). Updated qualitative work substantively contributes to an academic and policy landscape lacking rich data and definitions of existing US armed groups.

Unpacking the meso- and micro-level contexts of US armed defense also offers potential conceptual implications for comparative politics research on armed groups and political action. As already discussed, comparative politics frequently focuses on armed groups in active contest with states or governments at the expense of studying armed actors with more parochial, or even pro-government, interests. Understanding the wider case universe within which armed groups mobilize and interact with one another is critically important for explanations of armed political action. Accounts of political violence cannot fully explain why some groups engage in violence without considering why similar armed groups do not. Better conceptual understandings are critically important for measuring and comparing different types and patterns of political behavior (cf. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Gerring 2017), especially actions prone to normative and dichotomous typologies such as political violence.⁴³

Additionally, by focusing on a case where actors' fears are unclear and do not appear to be motivated by observable structural grievances, this research offers potential implications for comparative understandings of how threat mobilizes political action. Should we assume that actors defensively mobilize due to directly testable fears around personal security and status, or is armed action also motivated by additional concerns beyond clearly observable 'costs' (cf. Wood 2003; Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub 2021)? This research suggests that the reasons individuals feel the need to arm themselves are likely to be more complicated than we might predict, and thus supports research agendas that point to the mediating role of 'emotions' and actors' worldviews in explanations of political action (cf. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 44-48).

B. Scope, Timeframe, and Definitions

As I discuss in Chapter 2, private armed groups existed throughout US history as auxiliary military and policing forces, vigilante groups, and community defense for

⁴³ E.g., 'terrorism' is often defined in normatively-laden terms and suffers from both conceptual stretching and political instrumentalization.

Black communities. The armed groups in this research are a contemporary phenomenon first emerging in the 1970s. I narrow my investigation to armed groups under the Trump Administration (2017-2021). Some of my research may capture conditions present under President Obama (2009-2017) given participants' stated membership timelines. Out of 29 participants: five militia members and one community defense group member joined between 2009 and Dec. 2016 (Obama); one community defense group participant joined prior to 2009; six participants joined their group during the first year of the Trump Administration; and the remainder joined (or were seeking) to join their group well into the Trump Presidency.

While this is not intended to be a statistically causal sample, the theoretical comparison population for members of armed groups are gun owners who have not joined armed groups. Within the case universe of armed groups, I am only concerned with organizations that adopt defensive, nonviolent postures at the time of interview.⁴⁴ I do not investigate relevant, but highly studied, politically violent actors on the right, such as the Michigan Wolverine Watchmen, white supremacist cells, and militias who participated in the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol. This conceptual narrowing is driven by both theoretical and pragmatic objectives. Theoretically, there is little research on armed groups without politically violent outcomes. As already discussed, unravelling variation across armed groups requires considering 'quieter' acts of armed mobilization. Pragmatically, politically violent actors are unlikely to respond to interview requests, either due to security concerns, or as a result of criminal investigations.

I also did not sample explicitly white supremacist or neo-Nazi groups. None of the groups in my sample publicly recruit on white supremacist platforms or ideas. Consistent with this theoretical assumption, explicitly white supremacist groups in the US (e.g., Aryan Nations) are often treated as related, but analytically distinct, organizations in literature on racial animosity, vigilantism, and social movements (cf. Berlet 2003, 34-35; Pitcavage 2001, 958-959; McVeigh 2009; Bateson 2021).

One of the observations of this research is how the behavioral outcomes and organizational models of armed groups matter for analytical comparison at least as much as the beliefs of members. While these considerations are well-established in literature

⁴⁴ An important observation of armed politics is that groups can slide in and out of violence and nonviolence (cf. Carey and Mitchell 2017; Staniland 2015, 2017).

on political violence, variations in outcomes and organizational goals across US armed groups, and even militias, is understudied. I complement research that traces the political belief systems in which militias operate by observing how armed actors, including militias, interact with and respond to structural arrangements of private violence and policing. Doing so underscores the systemic influence of white supremacy on contemporary patterns of private violence and gun use, regardless of whether actors are attuned to these legacies.

At the macro level, while the context of legalized gun ownership distinguishes the US case, these conditions are not without global precedent and have not made analysis of US armed groups or gun wielders incomparable (cf. Carlson 2014; Squires 2000). Prior scholarship compares the case of US gun wielding and militia groups to various global contexts, including Northern Ireland, Canada, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, India, and South Africa (cf. Springwood 2007; Reed 2013; Weeber 2003; Castells, Yazawa, and Kiselyova 1995; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012; Carlson 2014). Rather than evaluating whether the armed groups in this study are ‘comparable’ to some international cases (and not others), this research instead illustrates the social, institutional, and methodological implications of how we conceptualize the private use of weapons. This research demonstrates the importance of considering how armed actors operate in non-static state security arrangements that can reflect mixtures of public and private responsibility, even in contexts where questions around government’s monopoly on violence appear settled.

The principal investigation of this study is micro-level, stated motivations for armed group membership. ‘Armed group’ is defined earlier in this text. Although I explore macro- and meso-level factors as enabling conditions, and to ground qualitative research within the subfield, my analysis concentrates on the micro level: why do individuals feel motivated to join armed groups, what rewards do individuals perceive they receive from membership, and what threats do individuals believe they are defending against?

While some armed groups in this research, particularly militias, adhere to paramilitary structures, many groups in this study offer armed defense through horizontal organizations that emphasize community-based firearms and preparedness education. I use militia throughout this text to refer to: (1) armed civilian units instituted in the US colonial period from British security models; (2) the Militia Movement (1994 - present). While some groups reject the label ‘militia,’ often due to pejorative media and watchdog labelling, I use the term neutrally to refer to armed groups with

paramilitary command structures who frame their service as a constitutional duty and/or upholding law enforcement/military service oaths.

My sample consists of militias, leftist defense groups (i.e., those who explicitly adopt the label ‘leftist,’ ‘socialist,’ or ‘Marxist’), and community defense groups.⁴⁵ I use ‘community defense’ to reference organizations formed around the protection of a defined community, rather than a specified political or religious belief (e.g., Pink Pistols, Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, and National African American Gun Association).⁴⁶

Although largely addressed in the literature review, some terms require further specification. First, while all identities are socially constructed, not all identities hold the same sociopolitical salience. *Social* (or *collective*) identities are distinguished as “the part of one’s self-concept that is informed by one’s membership in groups defined by some shared attribute, such as language, religion, or race” (Kalin and Sambanis 2018, 240). Social identities correspond to informal rules that define who is a member by a set of behaviors, beliefs, or ascriptive characteristics (cf. Fearon and Laitin 2000, 848; Nascimento 2007, 10).

Second, I do not assume that firearms use represents inherently male sexuality or aggressiveness (cf. Tickner 2008, 255). Instead, much scholarship traces ‘hegemonic’ masculinity around gun use to traditions of armed service that pre-date the US state. Early modern European norms adopted patriarchal political systems of national defense organized around citizenship rights granted to males through their relationship with the state as a propertied citizen, and their relationship to ‘family’ as the head of a household and protector of a ‘castle’ (cf. Tickner 2008; Light 2015, 2017; Carlson and Goss 2017; Connell 2005, 213-214).⁴⁷ Comparative politics studies and observations of security institutions, including the Israel Defense Forces, the US Navy, and the Canadian

⁴⁵ The one exception in my ‘leftist’ sample is the Liberal Gun Club, who adopts Democratic Party (i.e., liberal) preferences. As I have only one interview from this national group, I categorize their responses with ‘leftists’ for parsimony; I also do so given that the Liberal Gun Club is similarly organized around a political stance, rather than defense of a targeted community. Militias are referred to as ‘right’ in this text as, by definition, these groups advocate for the devolution of law enforcement and policing to local, rather than federal, levels. In this sense, militias represent a political stance around limited or localist government.

⁴⁶ Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership (JPFO) is a secular organization. At no point in this research should analysis of JPFO be mistaken for anything other than analysis of a gun group organized around the stated principle of protecting historically targeted communities.

⁴⁷ I limit discussion to western European state models and traditions argued to be relevant to the US. Such limitation should not imply (inaccurately) that European models are universal across global cases; only that these traditions are the proximate context for the US.

Airforce, document how military rituals and hierarchies shape societal conceptions of masculinity and enlistee identity through the state's need to inculcate violence, aggression, and bonding among recruits (cf. Sasson-Levy 2011; Barrett 1996; Winslow 1999; Connell 2005; Tickner 2008).⁴⁸

Third, given contentious definitions of 'ideology,' I use the term 'belief' in my own analysis unless referencing a source citation. Political science largely accepts Richard Freedens's (2003, 32) definition of 'ideology' as "a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that: (1) exhibit a recurring pattern; (2) are held by significant groups; (3) compete over providing and controlling plans for public policy; (4) do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community." Interpretative approaches follow Clifford Geertz's (1973) understanding of 'ideology' as a 'thick' and 'meaning-laden' cultural system. Some Marxist approaches define 'ideology' as false consciousness that maintains systems of exploitation (see Freedens 2003, 7-9).

Fourth, I use the term left- and right-wing aligned with salient understandings of classic 'political ideology' scales in western European and US contexts. 'Right-wing' is broadly understood as a preference for limited government intervention in rectifying social inequalities, and thus reflects political orientations that implicitly or explicitly support the maintenance of status-quo hierarchies. This is contrasted with 'leftist' beliefs, which support government intervention to rectify inequality (cf. Lo 1982, 108; Diamond 1995, 6-9; Hervik 2021, 94-96).

While use of 'left' and 'right' reflects a simplified categorization, often these are labels participants adopt or use to describe themselves. In any case, 'right' and 'left' participant labelling is used in this text descriptively, rather than denotatively. That is, political descriptors are used aligned with how armed groups and actors self-identify (e.g., socialist, militia, etc.). Where armed groups express preferences for particular political programs, I do not assume that their members necessarily share these beliefs (see Chapter 5).

⁴⁸ Globally, males are overrepresented in state security forces and hold a disproportionate share of private firearms (cf. Howland 2020, 20; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012, 4; Bevan and Florquin 2006). US military service was limited to males until 1948, and women were not authorized for ground combat roles until 2013 (under Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta). Similarly, LGBTQ+ service members were subjected to a 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' policy until 2011, and the 2021 re-opening of armed forces to transgender service members under President Biden was a contested policy under the Trump Administration. Internationally, examples abound of manhood rites tied to war, hunting, and violence; in the US, boys can be 'born' into 'men' with a gun (cf. Hofstadter 1970; Springwood 2007; Connell 2005; Kahan 1999, 455; Gibson 1994, 22, 41; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012; Kohn 2004, 104-107).

Finally, I do not spend time evaluating whether ‘rightist’ participants in this research reflect ‘far’ or ‘radical’ right movements. While important, labels such as ‘radical,’ ‘far,’ and ‘extreme’ offer little analytical leverage for the questions of this study (cf. Diamond 1995, 5), and remain conceptually ‘muddy’ in academic debate (cf. Mudde 1995, 2007; Blee and Creasap 2010, 270; Mayer 2021, 17-19; Perliger 2012, 11-18). Part of the goal of this investigation is to illuminate how systems of private violence and government regulation influence similar types of armed action by actors with varied beliefs and positionalities. In this instance, subcategorizing by belief runs the risk of obscuring structural overlaps between groups, rhetorical connections to mainstream discourse, and ground-level nuance in action, organizational forms, and membership bases.

The inclusion of community defense groups additionally illuminates the variation of armed actors in the contemporary US. The politically-framed dichotomy of an armed ‘left’ and an armed ‘right’ is a false one that does not exist on the ground. The armed groups in this research interact with a constellation of public and private violence that includes armed police, individual gun owners, other private groups, and non-armed violent actors. Additional terms used in this text are defined throughout where raised.

C. Analytical Framework

In this section I discuss how prior comparative politics literature on armed mobilization is built on in this research. Broadly, the field divides documented structural relationships into at least five established, analytical categories: relative deprivation (sentiments of economic precarity); social resentment (sentiments of outgroup bias and/or ingroup bonding); religious, conspiracist, and political beliefs; and political trust and emotional rewards. As many relationships proposed in prior political action literature overlap and rely on similar mechanisms or pathways for mobilization, these five categories necessarily reflect artificial distinctions. For instance, race, gender, and class are cross-cutting and intersectional positionalities that influence economic and educational access, as well as the likelihood of negative encounters with government institutions and policing.

As a qualitative study, I rely on previous literature and explanations to orient my investigation of participant worldviews. The goal of this research is not to ‘test’ existing explanations in literature, but rather to devote analytical space to considering how each

of these established, proposed causal relationships might appear at the micro level in participants' worldviews and perceived motivations for actions. The implications from this study therefore result from theory-building and informal probing along previously proposed structural relationships heavily documented in prior literature.

Rather than discounting the relevance of prior explanations, this research instead shows how qualitative work on ground-level worldviews can help comparative politics literature better understand how proposed structural variables may or may not appear in actors' motives, perceptions, and understandings. At no point should this research be read as assigning one motive for action—human agency is by definition multicausal, variable, and multidimensional. Rather, this research suggests that different and more layered explanations than currently exist are needed to understand armed groups as a category of political action, particularly when considering micro-level motivations. In the following subsections I overview the structure and content of the chapters in this research.

Chapter 2: Comparative and Historical Case Context

Through a chronological, historical case review, this chapter discusses how patterns of private violence in the US evolved within an infrastructure of state control. In the US, as in many countries, gun ownership was initially tied to citizenship status. In contrast to most western European states, however, US government reinforced racial restrictions on gun use while loosening class-based access to firearms. The US Constitution codified systems of private violence already in place for genocidal land displacement and the violent policing of slave populations in the colonial era (cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2018, 33). After the colonial era, the US federal government delegated violence to local actors to maintain oppressive local power systems. Decades of government regulation well into the 20th century conferred firearm access to 'citizens' who were legally identified through race, ethnicity, and gender.

The history of how private firearms acquired a prized position in US society is important for understanding the repertoires of action and discourse civilian armed groups instrumentalize and appeal to today. I document how federal and state government decisions to regulate private violence along racially and gendered-biased lines constructed and entrenched norms of 'virtuous' gun owners as white, heteronormative males. This chapter also shows how the armed groups in this research are more accurately conceived of, not as products of the past, but rather as outcomes of

contemporary shifts in political discourse that altered elite and popular views of both gun rights and individual responsibility for defending against private ‘criminal’ violence.

Chapter 3: Relative Deprivation

Chapter 3 examines participant accounts for sentiments of economic precarity and material-based grievances at the individual (egoistic) and group (fraternal) level (relative deprivation theory). I use self-reported data on participants’ employment, education, and perceived income and class status to situate my sample in relation to surveys of gun owners and state demographics. Conforming to existing data on US gun owners, my sample predominantly consists of economically stable, middle-class, white males who perceive they are doing about the same or better than others in their community. I additionally contribute evidence on the costs of gun ownership and training that further confirms how firearms use requires a minimum level of resources.

A strength of qualitative investigations is the ability to ask individuals about their perceptions of precarity, to reflect on inequality in their community, and to consider how the economic position of their community relates to state and national economies.⁴⁹ While generally pessimistic about the economic future, my participants did not perceive negative economic downturns would affect their own futures or positions, or that these concerns were directly related to their own gun use or armed group membership.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates the need for caution and nuance when considering how micro-level motivations relate to structural economic indicators. In this research, participants’ positionalities, political beliefs, and sentiments of systemic distrust interacted heavily with participants’ economic perceptions and worldviews.

Chapter 4: Social Resentment

Chapter 4 investigates how social mechanisms identified in prior comparative politics literature might manifest at the micro level in participants’ perceived motivations for armed action. If social resentment (outgroup bias) or related mechanisms around ingroup bonding significantly influence armed action, evidence

⁴⁹ In political behavior research, future gains are argued to reduce incentives for political action, see, for instance, Mueller (2018), Melcher (2021, 305-307), and Pettigrew et al. (2008). Often summarized as the ‘upward mobility’ hypothesis, optimism about the economic future is used to explain why low-income electorates do not consistently favor objectively beneficial redistribution policies (‘why the poor don’t soak the rich’) (cf. Alesina and Glaeser 2004, 191-192, 208; Benabou and Ok 2001; Hirschman and Rothschild 1973).

would likely appear in participant and group discourse in at least two ways. First, participants might discursively frame threats in ‘othering’ terms (e.g., outgroup threats). Second, participants might rhetorically link the benefits of defensive action with their own identity (e.g., armed defense affirms senses of ingroup belonging). To understand how sentiments of outgroup bias/animosity (social resentment) or pressures for ‘ingroup bonding’ might influence my participants’ motivations, several of my interview questions directly asked about community, participants’ positionalities, their experiences shooting guns, their current firearms practices, and their favorite parts of membership (see Appendix 1).⁵⁰

While a minority of my militia members evidenced social resentment discourse, these concerns did not appear to be the primary focus of participants’ interviews. Additionally, militia participants did not perceive their own actions primarily as a response to social ‘others.’ The social ‘threats’ identified by militia participants, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, instead concentrated rhetorical blame on political elites. For community defense and leftist armed group members, arming to represent non-traditional gun owning demographics was important, but primarily as a strategy tied to pragmatic armed deterrence. Participants outside the militia right felt ‘empowered’ through the services their groups offer to unarmed communities, a theme returned to in Chapter 6.

Overall, militia actors in this sample do not demonstrate much discursive evidence that they feel their armed group membership is a response to conscious outgroup bias and social resentment grievances. Regardless of potential desirability bias effects, observations here focus on how all white gun owners and armed group members benefit from the saturation of white supremacy across sociopolitical structures. Interview evidence from my participants thus confirms how social resentment operates at both conscious and unconscious levels.

Observations in this chapter show that adult gun ownership and armed defense membership may reflect prior structural opportunities to use and train with firearms, even at early ages. In this sense, guns and arms training can be thought of as a form of generational wealth that reinforces existing systems of oppression across gender and race. Firearms experience in childhood or early adolescence is common in my sample.

⁵⁰ To avoid priming subjects I did not focus on social policy issues (e.g., immigration, abortion, affirmative action) unless these were raised by participants. Demographic questions were reserved for the end of the interview.

Out of the 25 individuals who remembered the first time they fired a gun, all but one individual learned to shoot by the age of 20, and 68 percent were introduced to firearms through a family member. Notably, however, this positionality does not distinguish armed group members from the theoretical comparator population of gun owners. Finally, I uncover a previously unobserved motivation in participant discourse. Members interviewed here consistently relied on ‘value signaling’ and ‘sign-posting’ language around ‘responsible’ gun use.

While the conclusions in this chapter are not directly testable in this research, understanding how armed groups, as well as gun ownership, in the US relates to social resentment requires not just ground-level nuance around how these mechanisms motivate armed actors, but also wider awareness of the historical structures and demographic patterns that concentrated arms in white hands.

Chapter 5: Religious, Conspiracist, and Political Beliefs

Chapter 5 asks whether certain beliefs appear to enable or constrain my participants’ perceived motivations for membership. Assessing the role of religious, conspiracist, and political frames requires understanding group rhetoric in relation to participant accounts, and vice versa. At the meso level, I ask whether armed groups use identifiable religious, conspiracist, or political discourse to describe and organize group structures and goals. At the micro level, I observe whether participants use these beliefs to describe and interpret their own membership.

I start by evaluating participant and group discourse for evidence of religious and conspiracist beliefs. I included two questions in my semi-structured interviews around religious belief and participation. For interviews conducted after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, I also included questions about public health interventions to indirectly probe participants’ beliefs around anti-mask and anti-vaccine conspiracies. Overall, neither groups nor participants substantively discussed or referenced religious or conspiracist beliefs when explaining their own motivations and actions.⁵¹

Second, I consider participant and group discourse for evidence of hyper-partisan, ‘extremist,’ or ‘localist’ political beliefs. I asked several questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their political views in terms of partisan markers, as well as

⁵¹ In addition to noting the presence of conspiracist language, I also surveyed group and participant discourse around media distrust. While an imperfect proxy, distrust of centralized sources of authority and media is a core feature of conspiracy. However, these results were predictable and not analytically useful to report given space constraints.

in programmatic terms.⁵² Participants documented how political beliefs are important for their own motivations and worldviews, but not in the ways prior political science research suggests.

Despite obvious disagreement across armed group members on the preferred level of government intervention in society, all participants in this research shared a belief in an individual (or privatized) responsibility for community defense. Nearly all participants discussed the need for armed citizenries (or proletariats) to counteract state failures and the concentration of government power. I explain how this shared worldview connects with neoliberal discourse around crime and policing in both this chapter and Chapter 6. I illustrate how stated beliefs in individual responsibility for defense in my sample help enable participants to perceive private armed defense as a legitimate contribution to the public good. Once again, observations in this chapter primarily underscore how armed actors respond to not only the past, but also to contemporary political discourse, government policy, and sociopolitical conditions.

Chapter 6: Political Trust and Public Service

Chapter 6 assess participants' sentiments of political and institutional trust. First, to gauge participant perceptions of 'normlessness,' I asked a series of open-ended questions around trust in government, politicians (disaggregated by local, state, and federal), policing, justice systems, and community. Second, I asked participants questions about their own political engagement, and whether they perceived voting and constituent lobbying as effective for achieving goals. Third, I asked participants to evaluate whether state and local governments 'do a good job.'

My participants from politically diverse armed groups all expressed worldviews centered around high levels of distrust in government, policing, and traditional political processes. Participants perceived endemic corruption and broad inefficacy across government institutions at higher rates than those recorded in the US electorate (no comparable data was available on gun owners). Strong perceptions of corruption and distrust appeared to legitimize and heighten participants' perceptions that armed defense is a necessary and urgent action. My sample predominantly understood their firearms training as a 'public good' one can tangibly provide in lieu of effective policing and

⁵² I do not spend time unpacking contradictions between political beliefs and policy support or partisanship. Even in the general electorate there is much debate about the 'ideological' consistency of voters' political beliefs (cf. Ellis 2012; Converse [1964] 2006).

government service provision. All participants expressed how their membership was rewarding because of the opportunity to serve clearly defined communities through arms training and private defense.

Overall, the next three chapters illustrate how white males are structurally advantaged in gun ownership, leading to overrepresentation in the gun owning population and armed groups. The conclusion from such observations is that comparative analysis that narrows investigations to right-wing actors may be missing how structural conditions unrelated to observed indicators might motivate armed actors, as well as how worldviews and beliefs influence how actors interpret their own positionalities.

In the remaining chapters I discuss how participants' understandings of community defense as a private duty or responsibility appear to be an important enabling belief in this sample, regardless of the political orientation or constituency appeals of the group. Political distrust and emotional rewards also appear heavily in participant worldviews and perceived motivations for armed group membership. Participants frequently explained their own actions in reference to their distrust of government and their desire to help specified communities. I observe how distrust of government—its capacity to police and provide security, rather than the institution of the state writ large—is significant for how actors in this sample understand their motivations for arming. Perceptions of normlessness (i.e., corruption) and powerlessness (i.e., inefficacy of political participation) appear to help my actors view armed defense as not only pragmatically necessary, but also public-serving and 'altruistic.'

To reiterate, the conclusions from this research should be read as suggestive and exploratory observations for mechanistic theory-building, not as statistical or causal implications. Such conclusions are also not meant to imply that participants in this study are *only* motivated by sentiments of distrust and emotional rewards. As illustrated throughout, and well-recognized in political science methodology, human agency can never be explained with moncausality. Rather, observations here suggest that two variables currently unconsidered in comparative politics accounts of armed mobilization—political distrust and emotional rewards—may offer fruitful avenues for future research. This research additionally demonstrates the risks of compacting structural accounts of armed mobilization into isolated categories. A key observation of this study is how structural and statistical analyses may benefit from ground-level research that can more fully capture how actors perceive their own reasons for action.

D. Research Design

In this section I discuss my research design and data collection process. To investigate the micro- and meso-level drivers of armed mobilization, this research uses semi-structured interviews and political ethnography. I employ an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ in the sense that I seek to “glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2009, 5; see also Simmons and Smith 2017, 126). This research is not intended to ‘test’ armed action in a statistical sense. My sample is not representative of the unknown population of armed groups, and was instead built to understand how participants interpret their own actions. Armed group participants are *representative of the groups* in which they are members, but my sample of armed groups is *not statistically representative*.

To situate thick, qualitative data, I triangulate individual interpretative evidence from interviews with meso-level data. I review group discourse from websites and public social media accounts, as well as from informational packets provided by groups. I situate the armed actors and groups in this research within the wider case universe (gun owners, and politically violent and nonviolent armed groups, respectively) through survey data, as well as academic and grey literature. I additionally contextualize responses with observational fieldwork and pilot interviews. On the macro level, I rely on historical process-tracing, national data sets, and academic scholarship.

In this section, first, I discuss my data collection process for semi-structured interviews and elaborate on relevant methodological decisions, including endogeneity, sampling, and representativeness. I next discuss how I collected observational evidence. Third, I review additional meso-level primary data surveyed for this study, and briefly discuss evidence from media and grey literature. Finally, I detail relevant ethical concerns. Throughout this section I elaborate on the limitations and challenges faced during fieldwork and the data collection process.

Interviews

The findings from this research primarily emerge from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of armed groups collected between January 2019 and December 2021.⁵³ I conducted a total of 45 interviews, 32 of which were with members

⁵³ During these months I periodically returned to London, UK for administrative check-ins (e.g., departmental and grant reviews), visa reporting, and to access campus resources.

of US armed groups consisting of varied political beliefs and constituency-based appeals.⁵⁴ Interviews began in-person, but the Covid-19 pandemic restricted further interactions. Ten interviews were conducted in person, four over video conference, ten through telephone, and twenty-one via primarily written correspondence. The average length of recorded telephone, in-person, and video interviews was around one hour and 25 mins, with four interviews lasting beyond two hours, two of which went over three hours.

Written interviews collected during the pandemic ranged from anonymous replies verified through organizational email accounts, to predominantly pen-pal type conversations lasting over a period of months. I held repeat interviews and extended follow-up conversations with the majority of participants, many of whom initially submitted written survey responses. Follow-up discussions included video conferencing, digital and text messaging, and in-person conversations (before Covid-19 restrictions). Only seven interviews consisted of purely written survey responses. Of these, four interviews were submitted blind to me via distribution through group organizers with whom I had developed a rapport. Three additional interviews, as discussed in more detail below, were written replies presented as a collective response from active group members (see Appendix 2).

While Covid-19 and the need to protect participant anonymity led me to collect more written responses than initially planned, methodological research suggests there are benefits and trade-offs to both modes of interviewing. While written interviews can reduce a researcher's ability to collect body language clues, some evidence suggests that self-completed surveys may result in higher participant comfortability, and lower incidences of non-complete (or missing) responses (cf. Gooch and Vavreck 2016; Kazmer and Xie 2008).

By 'semi-structured' I mean that I work from the same script of questions, but do not 'force' the conversation if participants move to unanticipated topics or share unexpected stories or insights. The order of questions was sometimes modified to facilitate natural and efficient conversational flow. A list of interview questions is provided in Appendix 1, and a list of interview dates and formats is provided in Appendix 2. The opportunity to repeat the same questions to multiple participants in

⁵⁴ One individual affiliated with the Kentucky III%/Kentucky State Militia was in the process of joining their armed group at the time of interview. This participant is counted as 'active' in the summary statistics for efficiency. I note their status in text where interview evidence is presented.

confidence and over time highlighted nuance in individual attitudes, verified perceptions of group actions and membership composition, and allowed for discussion of sensitive topics that could be uncomfortable in group or public settings.

Occasionally I was not able to ask every question to each participant due to time constraints. I made note of the most essential questions before each interview where time was limited. Additionally, participants were allowed to skip questions for any reason without elaboration in accordance with ethical research approaches. I make note of non-responses throughout this text.

Remaining adaptable during the interview was important for both efficiency and establishing a comfortable, conversational tone with participants. Interview questions were intentionally designed to create dialogues rather than to record responses in uniform, didactic, survey-like polling. I encouraged participants to digress and expand on prompts whenever they wished. I also modified questions impromptu where opportunities arose to probe deeper on topics, to clarify, or to allow participants' interests to partly direct conversation.

Methodologically, conversational adaptability during interviews is argued to allow for the documentation of important insights that would otherwise be overlooked, as well as for the exploration of potentially unknown and unaccounted for variables and narratives that influence action on the ground (cf. Lichterman 1998, 410; Curry 2017). I found this to be true in my interviews. Even if respondents provided 'scripted' answers, more loosely structured dialogue that emerged as participants became more comfortable and conversational enabled observations of which topics and concerns were hinted at, repeated, and notably absent when not responding to formal 'prompts.'

During fieldwork I continuously engaged in reflexivity, and modified and adapted questions in response to participant and pilot interviews (e.g., most effective questions, phrasing, etc.). Remaining attuned to changing social contexts was particularly important throughout this fieldwork, during which time Covid-19 became a global pandemic, the US witnessed widespread national protests over police brutality, and at least several hundred Americans participated in an attempted insurrection at the US Capitol. Throughout fieldwork I adapted my interview script to adjust to the turbulent sociopolitical context, as well as to leverage the presence of these events by including questions that captured participants' interpretations in real-time.

Endogeneity is an ever-present concern in studies of political action. While this research does not seek implications with statistical causal bearing and is instead interested in how actors perceive their own actions, longer membership in a group can undoubtedly influence and change what individuals remember about their own reasons for joining. In a qualitative sense, it matters less whether initial motivations match current perceived motivations for action if the goal, as it is in this research, is to understand actors' worldviews. Nonetheless, I do informally seek to overcome some endogeneity issues in this work by: chronicling participants' membership timelines; interviewing members at varying lengths of group membership (members who joined 14 years ago to ones who joined a few months ago); asking participants to reflect on more objective organizational timeline questions; collecting informal observations from friends and observers of local group members; and including an individual who was seeking to join a group at the time of interview. The militia recruit I encountered, however, occurred by chance introductions through local networks. It is very hard to identify these individuals in advance. Overall, it would be unwise to read this work without some caveat around endogeneity in mind for readers.

Some questions in this research are more likely than others to suffer from social desirability bias. Despite initial concerns, I found participant discourse demonstrated a degree of reliability for several reasons. First, participants provided answers against what social desirability bias would predict (e.g., sharing conspiracist, racist, and misogynist discourse). There were points during my interviews where I felt my positionality as a white individual born in rural, Appalachian Kentucky was more salient than my identity as a cisgender woman or academic. While I am careful to avoid excessive platforming of the more racist and misogynist rhetoric recorded in interviews, I purposely include offensive language in this text to demonstrate the level of candor achieved with some participants, as well as to remind readers of the differences between armed groups in this sample. Although groups can adopt similar organizational forms, it would be a mistake to overly conflate militias with groups who form to counter targeted violence and systemic racism.

Second, often the more biased or 'coded' rhetoric recorded in my interviews did not need further elaboration because much of this language exists and is drawn from mainstream political discourse. Pilot interviews and field observations were particularly important for establishing how militia members do not appear rhetorically different from some gun owners who watch *Fox News* and view armed groups with skepticism.

Third, all of my arms training organizations were legal and nonviolent at the time of interview, so it is reasonable to assume that there are few ulterior motives in how my groups present themselves to the public. More importantly, how individuals and groups consciously decide to portray motives and goals to others is in part what my interviews and surveys hope to capture. Group appeals and rhetoric can be considered alongside the documented actions and worldviews of participants to evaluate organizing beliefs, rank-and-file disagreement, and members' perceptions of group strategies.

Fourth, I am fairly confident in collected responses as my questions and interview goals were based around understanding (cf. Klandermans 2021, 227). Once participants understood I was interested in recording their own motivations and perceptions, interviewees became much more open. Often communication with participants existed beyond the initial interview, and not due to my own probing. Participants remained in touch after the initial interview by sharing resources, news, YouTube clips, or additional insights and reflections. As one informant confided, "I view taking this survey as a risk. We do not participate in this kind of stuff . . . Something told me to go ahead with this one, so I beg you to please respect your commitments you've made in this interview." I have sought to do just that. There are very few participants with whom I was unable to establish some friendly rapport beyond interview correspondence, and I tried to share moments of humor and levity in the dialogue recorded here.

In addition to armed group members, I also conducted pilot interviews with regular gun owners, gun rights advocates, and arms trainers, some of whom shared overlapping conspiratorial beliefs and social networks with armed groups. These interviews served several purposes. First, while pilot interviews do not constitute a formal comparison group, this data was advantageous for 'probing' the beliefs of similar gun users with different behavioral outcomes. Second, pilot interviews with local gun users concentrated on icebreaking, trust building, and active listening to ensure that my questions were phrased in sensitive, effective, and conceptually translatable language (Groves et al. 2009). Finally, as these individuals frequently shared social networks with armed group members, building rapport through pilot interviews allowed me to 'vet' my research with individuals who could offer introductions to closed armed groups.

Sampling

My sampling strategy was ‘diverse,’ extending to armed groups with different political messages, organizations, and constituency appeals. As the goal was collecting long, in-depth, qualitative interviews for tentative theory building and worldview elaboration, this sample did not aim to be statistically representative. As armed groups tend to be closed circles, this project initially planned to rely on snowball sampling in regional groups. This strategy was untenable and quickly abandoned during the pilot stages as the Covid-19 pandemic restricted in-person approaches. Sampling for this research therefore draws from armed groups from across the country.

Instead of snowball sampling, I sent 595 ‘cold’ interview requests to 462 groups across the US with active web presences (182 militias, and 280 other groups).⁵⁵ Organizations that did not provide an official contact mechanism (e.g., email account, social media messaging function), or whose listed email addresses returned undeliverable responses are not counted in the 595 total. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, no reliable data on the number of armed groups currently exists. For instance, the 182 requests I sent to militias over a few years includes groups not counted by SPLC (2021), which estimated only 169 paramilitary groups existed nationwide in 2021. According to self-reported estimates from national organizations: I was able to contact a total of 82 SRA chapters (58 chapters listed in March 2022, see fn 9); 25 Pink Pistols chapters (45 chapters listed in Feb. 2022, see fn 9); and 120 NAAGA chapters (124 chapters listed in Sept. 2021, see fn 9). These numbers are only approximate, not least as chapters went in and out of existence throughout fieldwork.

The completion rate for both groups was seven percent (13 out of 182 militias contacted provided completed interviews, and 19 out of 280 other groups completed interviews). An additional 12 groups not included in the completion rate expressed a willingness to participate in this study, but did not return completed surveys for various reasons. Only two groups explicitly declined interviews. One militia sent an email stating the group does not permit interviews, and one leftist group did not wish to participate, but welcomed my membership.

Often I went through great lengths to ‘vet’ myself to participants, which required multiple interactions before reaching the interview stage. This included answering a series of questions and emails before knowing who was at the other end of the account,

⁵⁵ Two of these 462 groups were Canadian chapters of the Socialist Rifle Association and the Pink Pistols.

and going through extra steps to verify my personal and professional identity. Vetting occurred with both leftist defense groups and militias, but likely for different reasons.⁵⁶

The pandemic complicated my initial outreach strategy as I could no longer rely on building rapport through in-person interactions or meeting armed group members organically. Additionally, the political climate and ongoing public health crisis during fieldwork raised ethical issues about requesting time from a participant population estimated to contain a disproportionate number of first responders and social justice organizers. Privacy and publicity concerns also prevented some interviews from coming to fruition. Leftist defense groups were less likely to respond to interview requests after the heavy-handed treatment of Black Lives Matter protestors in the summer of 2020; and militias were more recalcitrant after the insurrection on January 6, 2021.

Three armed groups—the Orange County SRA, Texas Militia, and an anonymized socialist firearms education organization in the southwest—decided to respond to interview questions with answers written as a group, rather than by individual members. While preventing inclusion in some of the micro-level investigations in this research, these collective responses informed meso-level analysis and reflected how some armed groups may actively rely on horizontal organizational structures. Given no official data exists on the number of groups nationwide, even less data exists on the average size of groups. Participants' self-reported estimates of group size appeared unreliable, and ranged in who they included in their group tallies (e.g., some militia groups counted every eligible male over 18; other groups reported statewide counts of affiliated chapters).

The national geographic distribution of my core sample of 34 armed groups and 29 individual participants is shown in Figure 1.1. In all cases I anonymize the name of the armed group chapter to the state level (e.g., Chicago SRA would be Illinois SRA). In some instances, this does not provide enough protection for participants. In these cases, I obscure the chapter's state (e.g., NAAGA), or the individual's state affiliation (e.g., Rhode Island or Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club (JBGC) would be JBGC). For the

⁵⁶ Leftist groups tended to worry about being ‘outed’ to other armed actors or law enforcement, while militia participants were more concerned about negative publicity. In my interview with Ohio Defense Force (ODF) member, Robert (1793091), he tells me that ODF prohibited all members from accepting interviews after an undercover journalist ‘penetrated’ their group. Robert feels the resulting Time Life article unfairly lumped ODF with openly violent groups who do not coordinate with law enforcement (Gellman 2010, see also Beyerlein and Lough 2010).

same reasons, I present the geographic distribution of groups in Figure 1.1 as ‘militia’ and ‘non-militia’ only, and obfuscate some state locations in Table 1.1.

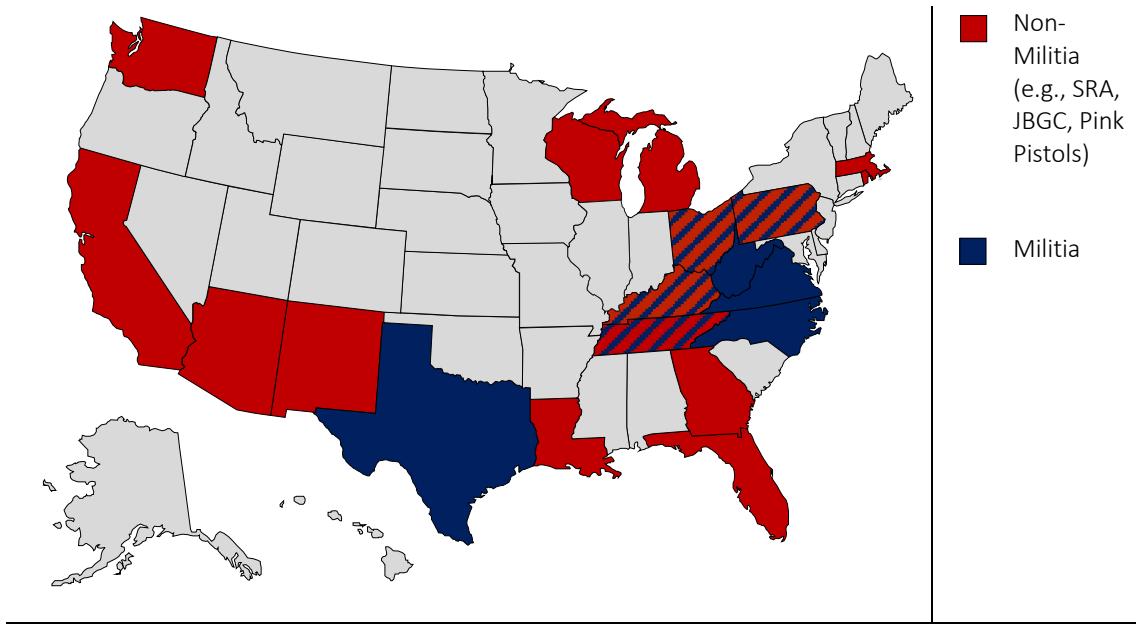


FIGURE 1.1. Geographic distribution of sampled armed groups

A list of armed groups interviewed in this research is provided in Table 1.1. I was able to interview multiple members of two groups, which are referenced in text. Additionally, some participants were members of multiple armed groups and offered interviews on both experiences. These ‘additional’ interviews are not counted in my totals (i.e., 1 person = 1 interview); however, the secondary group affiliation is included in Table 1.1. At least three individuals were involved with self-described underground defense groups, or groups that connect members only through encrypted messaging and word-of-mouth. These underground groups offer emergency armed protection for targeted communities against primarily white supremacist harassment and violence. I do not note which participants participate in these groups or their states due to security concerns. Similar groups likely exist within the militia community, but if they do, I was unable to convince these individuals to speak with me. Several groups wished to remain completely anonymized, and this is noted in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1. List of sampled armed groups

	Armed group	State	Group classification
1	Arizona Socialist Rifle Association (SRA)	AZ	Left
2	Orange County SRA	CA	Left
3	Florida SRA	FL	Left
4	Undisclosed leftist community defense group	FL	Left
5	Anonymized leftist community defense group	FL	Left
6	Georgia Pink Pistols	GA	Community Defense
7	Georgia SRA	GA	Left
8	East Kentucky Militia	KY	Right
9	Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia	KY	Right
10	Kentucky III%/Kentucky State Militia* (recruit)	KY	Right
11	Anonymized leftist community defense group	KY	Left
12	Louisiana Pink Pistols	LA	Community Defense
13	Massachusetts Pink Pistols	MA	Community Defense
14	Michigan SRA	MI	Left
15	Watchmen	NC	Right
16	Ohio Liberal Gun Club	OH	Left
17	Ohio Defense Force	OH	Right
18	Philadelphia Light Foot Militia	PA	Right
19	Pennsylvania SRA	PA	Left
20	Undisclosed Pennsylvania militia	PA	Right
21	Rhode Island John Brown Gun Club	RI	Left
22	Anonymized militia group in Tennessee	TN	Right
23	Texas Militia	TX	Right
24	Texas State Militia	TX	Right
25	Virginia Oath Keepers (<i>not affiliated with national Oath Keepers</i>)	VA	Right
26	Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership	WA	Community Defense
27	Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club	WA	Left
28	Wisconsin SRA	WI	Left
29	West Virginia Militia	WV	Right
30	Underground community defense group	Midwest	Left
31	Underground community defense group	South	Left
32	Chapter of the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA)	South	Community Defense
33	Underground community defense group	Southwest	Left
34	Anonymized socialist firearms education organization	Southwest	Left

I was not able to sample from Black armed defense groups except for one interview from the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA). This interview is somewhat atypical in that Nicole (NAAGA: 2979846) is my only cisgender woman, and she reports that “men are missing” in her chapter. This membership description contrasts with the other groups in this research, as well as empirical research, which documents the heavy overrepresentation of white males in not only armed groups, but also among gun owners nationwide. Black gun owners represent an estimated 14 to 25 percent of the national gun owning population (Azrael et al. 2017; Parker et al. 2017; Hepburn et al. 2007).

Unsurprisingly, many of my leftist armed group participants note how their groups lack representation from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. Zach (FL Left: 3028541) tells me that “many of our members are white, cis males in their 20s. We do have members of other demographics, but we are sorely lacking in Black representation.” Similarly, Jamie (JBGC: 2874603) says that they “are regrettably a majority white, majority male organization (although with a very large queer and trans contingent). BIPOC people, and people of color in general, are underrepresented. I think recruiting BIPOC people is challenging due to the nature and perceptions of gun culture in the US, but also because BIPOC people face greater risks of state and private violence when they play high profile roles in political organizing.” And SRA member Jordan (MI SRA: 4572657) shares that, “white men are overrepresented. But the chapter only has 120 or so members, and the gun community has historically been even whiter and male-r, so even though there is work to do on the diversity front, we’re not terrible. And our LGBT+ membership is like 45 percent.”

Two participants in this sample are femme-identifying, though one of these individuals prefers nonbinary gender pronouns. Four of my participants identify as nonbinary, and all of these individuals belong to leftist defense groups. All militia members adopted he/him pronouns and were cisgender males.⁵⁷ Evidence suggests my interviewees are fairly representative of other members in *their* armed groups, and sometimes participants explicitly indicated that their views were shared by fellow members. For detailed education and occupational data on participants, see Chapter 3.

⁵⁷ Cis is short for cisgender or cissexual, which describes an individual who identifies with the gender and sex they were assigned at birth. I did not ask about participants’ sexual orientations, though this often was offered voluntarily.

A caveat considered and leveraged throughout this research is the apparent oversampling of militia members in leadership positions, including group founders. This overrepresentation on the armed right is somewhat unsurprising, as ethical research approaches rely on traditional engagement channels for sampling (e.g., through group officers). Empirical evidence documents how most militias adopt hierarchical organizational structures that designate official spokespeople. All of my militia participants reported holding a leadership position, and four individuals indicated they were a founding member. To protect participant anonymity, leadership data is provided in aggregated form for other groups. In community defense groups, three out of five participants held a leadership role, and two of these three individuals said they were founding members. In leftist armed groups, all participants reported horizontal organizational structures with the exception of two groups. Of those two leftist groups, one participant indicated they were a founding member, while the other reported holding no positions. No other leftist participant referred to themselves as a founding member, or as holding an organizational ‘leadership’ role outside of being ‘outgoing’ at events and online.

Observation and Ethnography

Aligned with scholars such as Schatz (2009, 7), I understand political ethnography to be both a specific technique for capturing data, as well as a theoretical approach to research that grants “descriptive and/or explanatory priority to the ways in which ‘insiders’ on the whole understand their existence.” In the broadest sense ethnography is “the art and science of describing a group or culture” with a goal toward understanding processes of meaning-making (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004, 267; Geertz 1973).

In practice many equate ethnography with intensive ‘immersion’ in a community over a given time. However, what quantity of observational data is ‘necessary’ for theoretical insights in a research population is partly subjective and faces pragmatic constraints (e.g., how one determines ‘saturation points’ in research sampling).⁵⁸ All fieldwork requires answering questions about length of stay, level of participant engagement, and data saturation points: how much observation, of what kind, of whom, and for how long is enough?

⁵⁸ For instance, Richard Fenn’s influential observations of congressional politics in *Home Style* (1978) were in part derived from initial field research that spent, on average, less than a full working week with fourteen representatives (Fenn 1977, 884).

While formal fieldwork was conducted between 2019 and 2021, my cultural observations and immersion in the rural US and firearms culture dates to my childhood in eastern Kentucky. ‘Native’ ethnography poses unique challenges in making the familiar strange, and forcing researchers to examine the ways one in which one is both an ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ in their own cultural context (Bayard de Volo 2009, 229; Clifford 1988). Ethnography in one’s own cultural context, however, also offers strong advantages for interpreting discourse by leveraging networks and cultural knowledge.

In my own research, ethnography entailed engaging with participants in activities outside formal interactions, for instance, at bars, shooting ranges, and in general niceties that occur around interviews. While I did not record all of these encounters with armed group members, veterans, gun vendors, firearms trainers, Republican-identifying bar regulars, and local business owners, informal listening and immersion allowed me to reassess and reacclimate to the political climate of my home state under the Trump Administration. Observation in these instances also involved careful and reflective listening. After each interaction I recorded as much detail as soon as possible after the event in writing or through voice memo. These types of encounters faded as the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. Despite being unable to meet in person due to public health concerns, I was often able to create similar types of rapport with participants and informants through messaging, video, phone, and email correspondence.

Observational notes were analyzed for patterns alongside the careful evaluation of interview transcripts and group data. Field notes additionally allowed for iterative reflections on my own positionality and perspectives at different points of data collection (cf. Curry 2017, 117). Each of these interactions, in short, informed my research by contributing background understanding, developing leads, and informally tracking both participants’ attitudes and those of the wider community over time.

Ethnography also required familiarizing myself with firearms. Before this research I had handled and been around firearms, but my shooting experience was limited to BB guns (air guns). I enrolled in handgun classes where I fired firearms for the first time, attended gun shows, spoke with members of Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFWs) posts, joined the National Rifle Association, and followed gun culture, gun safety, and armed group pages on social media. Notable ethnographic events are recorded in Table 1.2.

TABLE 1.2. Selected list of ethnographic observations

Observation event	Location	Date
1 RK Gun and Knife Show	El Hasa Temple, Ashland, KY	Feb. 24, 2019
2 RK Gun and Knife Show	KY Horse Park, Lexington, KY	June 30, 2019
3 VFW Post 4075	Frankfort, KY	July 24, 2019
4 VFW Post 9235	Frankfort, KY	July 24, 2019
5 RK Gun and Knife Show	Center for Rural Development Somerset, KY	July 20, 2019
6 'Permitless' Constitutional Carry Class*	Bud's Gun Shop and Range Lexington, KY	Aug. 22, 2019
7 'Intro to Handgun: For Women Only' (shooting class hosted by certified NRA instructor)	Bud's Gun Shop and Range Lexington, KY	Aug. 25, 2019

* This event included an attendee who was a member of the West Virginia Mountain Rangers Militia.

Additional data from armed groups' public websites and social media pages offered further observational evidence. Due to social distancing constraints, most in-person armed group events were cancelled or postponed (e.g., potlucks, range days, etc.). To overcome limited opportunities for in-person observation, I supplemented initial in-person fieldwork with filmed trainings of group activities posted on social media channels. I also included interview questions that asked participants to describe their group social events and trainings, as well as share more detail about their interactions with other members both prior to and during the pandemic.

Group Social Media Posts and Secondary Sources

This research also reviews group rhetoric collected from organizational websites and public social media profiles on Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, MeWe, Dischord, and Reddit. The use of group data is helpful as it allows for the triangulation of participants' accounts with the documented goals, statements, and actions of their group. To capture how groups seek to portray themselves to the public and potential members, I reviewed armed groups' mission statements, 'about' pages, recruitment pamphlets, and public appeals. I saved screenshots and recorded information about social media posts as I encountered them. This documentation proved critically important due to the removal of a significant number of militias from Facebook and Instagram in August 2020 (cf. Meta 2021; Wong 2020; Blanchard 2020). I was fortunate

that much of my outreach occurred before this digital migration, as it made militias and right-wing groups considerably harder to contact and trace.

Some of the surveyed groups are local chapters of national organizations (e.g., Socialist Rifle Association). The degree to which local chapters accept the perspectives and policies of national organizations varies. I did not assume that local chapters adopted national policy, and instead sought out independent web presences to note discrepancies between chapters in the same organization.

While the conclusions in this work principally derive from fieldwork and primary data, I also triangulate author-collected evidence with academic scholarship, public data, archival sources, and grey literature. Many of these secondary sources were referenced in the literature review and used to define and specify the initial parameters of this study. Chapter 2 in particular relies on legal texts, archival material, and the detailed accounts of historians. Throughout I use nationally representative surveys to informally compare the responses of my own participants with the US electorate, and more precisely, gun owners (where survey data is available). When interviewing participants, I purposely included and adapted questions from national surveys and prior research to improve the transportability and operationalization of concepts considered here.

Research Ethics

Membership in an armed group is considered a sensitive topic. To protect participants in this study from unintended harm, this research follows informed consent procedures certified through ethical review bodies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Data is stored in alignment with European General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). I understand ‘informed consent’ as an ongoing process. Participants are made aware that they may withdraw their data from the study at any point.

All participants are anonymized and randomly assigned pseudonyms from popular names in corresponding age brackets.⁵⁹ Care is given to avoid disclosing indirectly identifying information. Thus, specifics or locations of participants may be omitted or vague in this text, even where this data is not. Participant quotations include some editing of general pauses and fillers in speech patterns (e.g., likes, ums, ahs, etc.). I do not remove language where doing so could alter the interpretation of the response.

⁵⁹ See US Social Security Administration’s “Popular Baby Names by Decade,” accessed March 31, 2022 at <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/>.

In the remaining text, readers will encounter intentionally unfiltered discourse I included to demonstrate the degree of trust achieved in my fieldwork. This sometimes extends to racist, antisemitic, and misogynist rhetoric. Ethnography requires understanding actors' worldviews, which demands the researcher demonstrate a degree of empathy for participants' perspectives (cf. Hervik 2021, 99-103; Bayard de Volo 2009, 232). Empathy employed for such documentation and understanding, however, is not the same as *endorsing* the views of participants.

The current 'mainstreaming' of more explicit ethnonationalist, white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and other discriminatory discourse can present a danger of appearing to apologize for, sanitize, or otherwise normalize racism and misogyny in militias (cf. Barkun 1997, 283-290).⁶⁰ Throughout this research I sought to remain mindful not only of my participants' perspectives and rights, but also of the rights of others in US society who so often are not offered the same elevated platform. Thus, in addition to the methodological advantages of including armed groups outside militias, platforming grassroots actors that speak for different constituencies offers additional ethical advantages.

While I do not always agree with the perspectives of my participants, it is important to understand why a small but significant segment of the US population feels motivated to join armed groups, and why an even smaller segment embraces explicitly ethnonationalist, racist, or misogynist discourse alongside armed mobilization. Understanding how and why certain political attitudes and narratives are popularly sustained and reinvented over time is critically important, not only for understanding armed action, but also for dismantling the discourses that contribute to political oppression.

Conclusion

In asking why individuals feel motivated to join armed groups, the goal of this research is to better understand political decision-making tied to threat mobilization in a case where the 'threats' to actors appear more symbolic than physical. A better understanding of why individuals decide to join armed groups in the US also offers comparative implications for investigations of armed politics more generally. In

⁶⁰ Prior research documents how some militia leaders consciously use media opportunities to promote positive, 'civic' images of these organizations (cf. Shapira 2013, 48-49; Barkun 1997, 283-290).

addition to the implications directly discussed above, more subtle observations—such as the less ‘extreme’ beliefs of my actors in relation to documented accounts of politically violent actors—emerge as participant discourse is presented in detail. Throughout I demonstrate the importance of considering participant positionality, the multiplicity of actors’ motives and understandings, and the national history of firearms regulation.

This qualitative investigation of politically diverse and publicly non-violent armed groups also illustrates the importance of theoretically conceptualizing armed politics as a spectrum of political action. Armed actors use violence to varying degrees and operate in security contexts that are not only dynamic, but also include non-state private actors. Empirically, I contribute data on understudied armed groups outside the US right.

Participant accounts in this research show how armed actors with very different positionality all appear to share a belief in an individual responsibility for self-defense—that is, a belief that government cannot, or should not, provide complete security from interpersonal violence and crime. The next chapter reviews the historical context of guns and private violence in the US to demonstrate how institutional decisions over time helped shape contemporary beliefs around who legitimately wields private arms, and how much protection from internal violence government is expected to provide.

As the next chapter illustrates, armed groups may be viewed as a logical response to distrust of government and political elites—especially when arming is perceived as a public-serving act legitimated by historic repertoires and legal precedents. In believing that government will not be there to help in crisis, individuals in this research understand the act of firearms training and armed defense as a community service that is both emotionally rewarding and civically meaningful.

As I discuss in the next chapter, in the US gun ownership rights were initially tied to citizenship status as a legacy of British colonial law. However, decades of US government regulation well into the 20th century explicitly policed and regulated gun ownership along racial lines. The way my actors approach their role in armed defense in part reflects a national context where private violence was afforded a semi-public, and thus legitimated, role in government infrastructure on the basis of race and ethnicity.

2. Historical Case Context

Introduction

The story of how private firearms came to be culturally entrenched in the United States is one defined by government action. In this chapter I discuss how the institutional legacies of white supremacy, indigenous land displacement, and private violence influenced the contours of contemporary firearms use. Armed defense as a repertoire of action is both a product of, and a response to, existing public/private security arrangements across local and national contexts that evolved over the course of US history. Comparatively, this chapter demonstrates how our understanding of armed groups benefits from investigating context-specific institutional legacies of coercion that reflect non-static mixtures of public and private control (cf. Obert 2018; Parrott 2012; Pereira 2003). What institutional, legal, and social structures contextually influence armed mobilization? Why do divergently positioned actors adopt a shared repertoire of private armed defense?

To explain how contemporary armed groups emerge at the grassroots level requires understanding how the US government historically delegated the violent enforcement of local order to private enterprise and private actors. In the US, institutional systems of settler-colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy, coupled with weaker central control, encouraged the devolution of violence to local actors (cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Obert 2018). Slave patrols, colonial scalper groups, militias, and various vigilantes operated throughout US history in a system of state control that relied on local forms of violent dominance and ‘policing.’ These legacies exist today in the coupling of gun ownership with white male identities.

Understanding how government restricted Black and Brown access to guns and created criminal ‘others’ in the past is the only way to understand how firearms became and continue to serve as symbols of white male status (cf. Omi and Winant 2015; Taylor 2014; Jardina 2019). In short, the racial and gendered history of gun regulation and private violence in the US underlies all contemporary armed action, regardless of whether actors are conscious of the social cleavages they draw on when wielding guns and forming private armed groups.

In the first section I discuss the institutional history of private armed defense in the US in a historical chronology. I examine the history of gun regulation, gun markets, and

armed community defense, and discuss how legal and ideological conceptions of armed citizenries transformed into modern understandings of an individual right to gun ownership and privatized defense. British legal precedents are explicitly discussed in this section not only due to their application in the US colonial period, but also due to their continued relevance in Supreme Court arguments today. In *Heller* (2018), for instance, the Supreme Court's ruling relies on legal arguments from the Glorious Revolution and the English Bill of Rights to establish the meaning of the operative clause of the Second Amendment. In the second section I demonstrate how the ideological and institutional history chronicled in section one holds social implications for contemporary patterns of private gun use and armed defense in the US.

I. Institutional Patterns of Local Armed Defense

This section reviews the history of armed defense and gun control in the US. I first discuss the Anglo-American history of civilian militias as a system of communal order and national defense, as well as the related founding myths that continue to inform arguments for gun 'rights.' Second, I consider the history of localized policing and private violence in the 1800s and review the transition to federal policing. Third, I discuss how firearms began evolving into a mass consumer industry in the early 1900s with the help of the US federal government. Fourth, I review legal arguments and court decisions on gun rights, and examine how a private right to firearms ownership emerged in the 1970s. I finish with a discussion of armed groups from the 1960s to the 2000s, starting with Black community defense organizations in the 1960s and moving to the various right-wing and white supremacist paramilitary groups that emerged from the 1970s through the 1990s. These armed groups are the institutional precursors to the contemporary defense groups that inform this thesis.

Anglo-American Traditions of Community Defense

The US relied on localized systems of defense longer than western European counterparts, and diverged from European models of domestic order by limiting access to firearms primarily by race rather than income or religion (cf. Cobb 2016, xvi, 44-45; Rosenblum 2000, 207, 297; Winkler 2013, 13-14; Kohn 2004, 59; Cottrol and Diamond 1991). Militias were an early modern European solution to internal order and national

defense replaced by mercenary troops before the transition to civilian armies (cf. Maitland [1908] 2013, 276-279; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 17-26).⁶¹

Most European militias predated the advent of portable firearms, which were part of the modern transformation to the nation-state model and armed infantries.⁶² Alongside the development of citizen armies, European states sought to suppress internal rebellion from the 17th through the 19th centuries through increasingly centralized control of the means of violence, as well as new domestic policing forces that removed firearms from private hands (cf. Tilly 1992, 68-70, 84; Tilly 1969, 22; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 26-33; DeConde 2001, 14-15, 94). By the 18th century most European militias were obsolete, and many nations restricted gun ownership by class, religion, or political status (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 24-26; DeConde 2001, 14-15).⁶³

When the right to arm was conferred across Europe, it was often confined to the landed classes and nobility: those most likely to share vested interest in the preservation of the regime. English game laws, notably the 1670 and 1671 statutes under Charles II, limited firearm ownership to nobility and those with an income of at least 100 pounds.⁶⁴ The 1689 English Bill of Rights, while restoring Protestant rights to firearms, only did

⁶¹ Attributed to Machiavellian thought, citizen forces were argued to temper the vices of mercenary and professional soldier classes by creating soldiers with commitments to community and nation (Rosenblum 2000, 300; Tilly 1992, 78). Machiavelli wrote in *Art of War* how “. . . one cannot make a foundation on other arms than one’s own and one cannot order one’s own arms otherwise than by way of a militia” (Machiavelli [1521] 2005, 25, Book I, line 189; see also 24-25, lines 170-190). As states began to rely on citizen troops, the concept of citizen soldiers and nationalism were born, along with new rights and obligations to be borne by the state (cf. Tilly 1992, 82-83; Knox 2001; Millis 1981, 27; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 61).

⁶² Historians date European firearms light enough for individual carry to the beginning of the 1300s (DeConde 2001, 7). Early firearms were dangerous to fire, unwieldy in battle, and initially viewed as violating norms of ‘gentleman’ warfare (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 4-6; DeConde 2001, 7-8). The invention of the wheel-lock mechanism in the 1400s, which created an internal ‘spark’ to light gunpowder, remained costly to produce and maintain until the 1500s, when firearms came into common usage in infantries (Tilly 1992, 76; DeConde 2001, 7-8; Stevenson 1909; Victoria and Albert Museum 2004). Flintlock weapons replaced wheel-lock arms in warfare from the 17th through the early 19th centuries (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 27-28; Hicks and Todd 1937).

⁶³ In Britain the militia defense system dates to Henry II’s Assize of Arms, 1181, 27 Hen. 2, modified by the Statute of Winchester, 1285, 13 Edw. 1 (cf. Maitland [1908] 2013, 276-279). Great Britain relied on civilian militias longer than other European monarchies (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 10-19; DeConde 2001, 14-15). Political criteria for militia membership were introduced during both the Elizabethan era and the Stuart period (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 19-20). British militias existed as domestic auxiliary forces until they were replaced by the creation of the Special Reserve through the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act, 1907, 7 Edw. 7, c. 9. The Special Reserve became the Militia again in 1921 before replacement by the Supplementary Reserve in 1924 (National Archives, UK, n.d.).

⁶⁴ An Act for the better preservation of the Game, and for securing Warrens not inclosed, and the severall Fishings of this Realme, 1670-71, 22 & 23 Car. 2, c.25. See also, Kennett and Anderson (1976, 24-25).

so ‘suitable to their conditions.’⁶⁵ Combined with the high expense of obtaining and maintaining craft firearms and their relative inefficiency for daily life, European restrictions were effective at keeping the mass of civilians unarmed at the end of the 1700s (DeConde 2001, 15; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 27-28; Millis 1981, 16).

While European gun rights were restricted to the upper classes and tied to hunting privileges, gun laws in the US colonial period were more egalitarian across white male populations due to firearms’ utility for hunting, trading, and violence against indigenous and slave populations (cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; DeConde 2001, 17-22; Winkler 2013, 115-116; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 50-55). National militia acts continued the colonial practice of enrolling free males between the ages of 18 and 45 in militias to provide emergency national defense. Militia members were expected to muster “with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints . . . not less than twenty-four cartridges . . . or with a good rifle . . . twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter of a pound of powder” (Militia Act of 1792, ch. 33, 1 Stat. 271; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 81-82; Blocher and Miller 2018, 21).

Slaves, indentured servants, and women were not considered full citizens in US founding documents, and usually were not part of the social contract granting rights or responsibilities for local defense.⁶⁶ From the start of independence, gun ownership was in principle and in practice limited to a class of white, property-holding men. Some of the first gun control laws in the US were passed due to fears of slave uprisings. As early as 1640 the colony of Virginia passed laws prohibiting Blacks from owning firearms, and similar statutes existed throughout the colonies (cf. Kennet and Anderson 1976, 50-51; Blocher and Miller 2018, 20; Kohn 2004, 58-60; Carter 2002, 4-6; Cottrol and Diamond 1991).⁶⁷ Slave patrols were adapted from Caribbean colonial practices and

⁶⁵ In response to perceived abuses by King James II, including the enlargement of standing troops and disarmament of Protestants and political dissenters, the English Bill of Rights (1689) declared “That the raising or keeping of a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of Parliament, is against law; That the subjects which are Protestants may have arms for their defence suitable to their conditions and as allowed by law” (see also Winkler 2013, 101-102, 115; DeConde 2001, 13-14; Rosenblum 2000, 307; *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 US 570 (2008), Dissent [Stevens] at 30).

⁶⁶ While white women did not play prominent roles in colonial armed service, there is evidence that at least some women participated in private violence against slave and indigenous populations. For instance, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2018, 45-46) observes the celebration of Hannah Duston in genocidal scalping culture, and Sally Hadden (2003, 2) notes how women were expected to provide substitutes for slave patrol service in South Carolina.

⁶⁷ New Orleans lashed slaves for carrying even a “cane or stick” in public in the 1800s (Leovy 1857, 259, no. 756; Winkler 2013, 132). Militia service was also circumscribed by race, and some militias would evolve into slave patrols before the Civil War (Winkler 2013, 133; Hadden 2003; Cottrol and Diamond 1991; Kachun 2003, 75). A 1715 letter from Carolina merchants petitioned government against arming

enforced white communal responsibility for the violent policing of slave populations, regardless of whether one owned slaves or not (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018, 59-60; Hadden 2003, 2-3).

The US colonies inherited British mechanisms of defense, including militias, firearms regulations, military structures, and attitudes toward standing armies (cf. Reinders 1977, 82-83; DeConde 2001, 24; Millis 1981, 26; Dougherty 1995, 963-964; Malcolm 1994, 138-143). Much political thought at the US founding is argued to stem from the Glorious Revolution (1688-1689) and English radical Whig concerns around centralized monarchical force (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 60; Kaufman 2001, 92; Blocher and Miller 2018, 18-19).⁶⁸ Classical ideas of republican defense emerged in constitutional debates about how best to ensure popular checks on the nation's military (cf. Stevens 2014, 125-133; Kaufman 2001, 91-92).⁶⁹ Rather than an individual 'right,' gun ownership during the founding of the US state was directly tied to citizenship rights and civic responsibility.⁷⁰ Thus, in US nationalist lore, the 'success' of the Continental Army riflemen in the Revolutionary War reaffirmed the superiority of the 'virtuous' democratic armed citizen (cf. Hofstadter 1970; Blocher and Miller 2018, 22; Rosenblum 2000, 307-309).⁷¹

However, rather than pure ideological opposition to standing armies or beliefs in civic 'armed virtue,' colonial and early American reliance on civilian militias also

Blacks for national defense: "there must be great Caution used, lest our Slaves when arm'd might become our masters" (Ketelbey et al. 1715, 197; see also DeConde 2001, 22).

⁶⁸ In *Federalist Paper* no. 46, James Madison (2003, 296) argues that "the several kingdoms of Europe . . . are afraid to trust the people with arms. And it is not certain that with this aid alone they would not be able to shake off their yokes. But were the people to possess the additional advantages of local governments . . . the throne of every tyranny in Europe would be speedily overturned in spite of the legions which surround it." See also *Federalist*, no. 29 (Hamilton), 178-179.

⁶⁹ In the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights, which would become a foundation for the Bill of Rights, George Mason (1776, sec. 13) wrote, "that a well-regulated militia . . . is the proper, natural, and safe defense of a free State; that standing armies, in time of peace, should be avoided as dangerous to liberty; and that, in all cases, the military should be under the strict subordination to, and governed by, the civil power" (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 67-68).

⁷⁰ George Washington (1783) described the new nation's militias as a civic duty: "every Citizen who enjoys the protection of a free Government, owes not only a proportion of his property, but even of his personal services to the defence of it . . . the Militia . . . shall be viewed as the Van and flower of the American Forces, ever ready for Action and zealous to be employed whenever it may become necessary in the service of their Country." Well-cited early American nationalist Joel Barlow (1792, 24) similarly wrote that democratic rights could temper the ills of arms by "making every citizen a soldier, and every soldier a citizen; not only permitting every man to arm, but obliging every man to arm."

⁷¹ Political thought since the Ancient Greeks linked military discipline with the cultivation of virtue and citizenship, extolling the paradigm of the Spartan soldier. In *Politics* (1997, 1328b2; 1268a16), Aristotle distinguished between the armed, who held stakes in the regime and could protect themselves, and the unarmed, who were like 'slaves': "for those who share in community must carry arms with them, both as regards their rule, thanks to the disobedient, and as regards any who try to wrong them from without."

reflected a governmental need for an armed populace to implement genocidal westward expansion and violent enforcement of slavery across a wide geography (cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 45-46; Winkler 2013, 113-118; Kohn 2004, 58-60; Katznelson 2002, 86-94, 102-103). Contrary to nationalist myths, civilian militias were undertrained, under armed, and of little help to the Continental Army except in the provision of volunteer enlistees.⁷² General George Washington (1776) complained about the detrimental effect of militia men on army cohesion, exasperatedly concluding that these regiments' "behavior and want of discipline has done great injury to the other troops."

Militias as a form of national defense proved less effective than professional armies in nearly every armed conflict in which they participated. Shortly after the US founding, Shay's Rebellion (1786-87) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1791-94) tested a relatively weak central government, as militia troops were both unreliable and recalcitrant to fight fellow citizens (Reinders 1977, 83-84; Kaufman 2001, 93).⁷³ After the Whiskey Rebellion, General Henry Knox wrote to Congress in December 1794 that militia men were underequipped and the militia laws unenforceable (Knox 1794; DeConde 2001, 41). With further failures in the War of 1812 and the 1898 Spanish-American War, militias had become an unreliable and arcane force in the eyes of many government elites.⁷⁴

By the mid-1800s, as modern policing and nascent National Guard forces assumed the militias' defunct role in national defense, militias took on more social and performative functions akin to fraternal lodges (cf. Fogelson 1989, 4-5; Kaufman 2001, 93-95; Obert 2018, 55-56; Reinders 1977, 86-87). 1800s militias, as armed groups of largely upper-class white men, could be violent enforcers of social hierarchy (cf. Reinders 1977, 86-87; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 152). Considering militias were

⁷² The colonies experienced chronic shortages of firearms during the Revolution, and the Continental Army relied on imported arms and munitions from France and Holland (Reynolds 1965; Hicks and Todd 1937; DeConde 2001, 18-19, 28-29). Civilian militia musters were poorly attended and outfitted. In 1680s Virginia, only ten percent of the militia reported with muskets, a trend reflected throughout the colonies and into the 1800s, when many men failed to report for 'compulsory' militia service (Millett 1990, 98-104; DeConde 2001, 18-19; Kaufman 2001, 92-93; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 47).

⁷³ Both rebellions stemmed from economic unrest over taxation and lack of government support for Revolutionary War veterans, and are often credited with the collapse of the Articles of Confederation and the drafting of the US Constitution (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 23-24; DeConde 2001, 41).

⁷⁴ The National Guard partly arose from the failure of militias to provide adequate national defense. In the War of 1812, Major General Andrew Jackson ([1814] 1926, 244), among other political elites, noted how the militia comprised a large number of deserters and lacked firearms training (cf. Winkler 2013, 133; DeConde 2001, 43-44; Reinders 1977, 85-86; Kaufman 2001, 93).

historically used to control slave populations and seize indigenous lands, it is not surprising that some militia units evolved into white vigilante groups as their institutional role in national defense diminished.

Before the Civil War, southern volunteer militias transformed into slave patrols that actively disarmed freed Blacks; after the Civil War, militia members formed vigilante groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK, 1866), that continued the slave patroller's work of terrorizing and disarming Black populations (cf. Hadden 2003; Blocher and Miller 2018, 36; Winkler 2013, 13, 133; DeConde 2001, 22; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018, 36; Obert 2018, 145-146). While less chronicled in scholarship, Black abolitionists used armed resistance before the start of the Civil War both to defend Black communities and to symbolically represent Black self-determination (cf. Jackson 2019). Prominent Black activists and abolitionist groups, such as the Radical Abolition Party, moved away from pacifism at the beginning of the 1800s, and especially after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.⁷⁵ Black militias formed across the US in the mid-1800s to counteract white vigilantes, with estimates of national enlistment at around 8,500 by the end of the 1850s (Jackson 2019, 97-99; Kachun 2003, 75-77).

As a government institution, white civilian militias were not legally dissolved until the 1900s, well after the precedent of using private arms as a tool for local power had been firmly entrenched.⁷⁶ While mass disarmament in Europe initially emerged from a ruling necessity to suppress internal dissent, over time governments' control of force became popularly framed as a public good, whereby ceding private arms enabled more efficient state-provided protection (cf. Tilly 1992, 75; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 12-13). In the US, divergent narratives and geography, coupled with colonial British

⁷⁵ Some Black abolitionists argued violence could earn freedom, much as the American colonists had at the end of the 1700s, and Haitian slaves had in 1804 (Jackson 2019, 4-7). Abolitionist leader James McCune Smith, who was the first African American to earn a medical license (University of Glasgow), wrote in an August 1856 editorial in the *Frederick Douglass' Paper* that, "Our white brethren cannot understand us unless we speak to them in their own language; they recognize only the philosophy of force" (McCune Smith 2006, 154; see also Jackson 2019, 12-14, 137-139; Fredrickson 2004, 125-126). In "The Ballot and the Bullet" Frederick Douglass (1859) wrote that, "If speech alone could have abolished slavery, the work would have been done long ago . . . For this, the ballot is needed, and if this will not be heard and heeded, then the bullet" (Douglass 1950, VII, 457-58; see also Jackson 2019, 149).

⁷⁶ In January 1903 Congress passed the Militia Act of 1903 (ch. 196, 32 Stat. 775), or the 'Dick Act' after its sponsor, Representative Charles Dick, which updated the Militia Act of 1792 (ch. 33, 1 Stat. 271) by separating the National Guard from the 'reserve' or 'unorganized' volunteer state militias. The Dick Act was modified by the 1916 National Defense Act (Pub. L. No. 64-85, 39 Stat. 166), which incorporated National Guard troops into the US Army (see An Act to Amend the National Defense Act of June 3, 1916 and 1933 amendment; Parker 1903; Blocher and Miller 2018, 22; DeConde 2001, 101-102, 115).

legacies, failed to transform self-defense from a private responsibility into a public provision.

The United Kingdom had also viewed “competence with arms” as “a public duty and a condition of citizenship,” but modern British firearms regulation since at least 1920 reframed gun control as a matter of “public order and public safety,” rather than as a form of “crime control” (Squires 2000, 7). Increasingly in the United Kingdom, ‘gun crime’ was viewed as a failure of public policy rather than the result of ‘deviant’ individuals, a reframing that would be nearly universally accepted in the 1990s after the Hungerford and Dunblane massacres (Squires 2000, 8). In the next section I discuss how US gun regulation continued to diverge from Britain throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, as federal government policy relied on market-oriented and devolved approaches to regulating internal violence.

Firearms Regulation and Policing in the 19th Century

By the end of the 1800s American firearm usage markedly diverged from western European traditions. Centralized policing in 1800s Europe successfully filled the role of militias by asserting national control over local law enforcement and professionalizing state forces to control mass uprisings and private violence (Tilly 1969, 19). In contrast, evidence suggests US policing throughout the 19th century was inconsistently implemented at the local level, underfunded, understaffed, prone to patronage, and usually systemically corrupt and complicit in racist vigilantism (cf. Brown 1969, 166-167; Obert 2018, 36-39; Spitzer and Scull 1977, 19-21; DeConde 2001, 93; Ethington 1987). The US system of locally devolved and semi-privatized law enforcement failed to create institutional norms that placed arms in the hands of state agents rather than private individuals (Tilly 1992, 69; Obert 2018, 4-6; Kaufman 2001, 90). Ineffective local policing and legal systems reinforced the idea that justice was to be dealt with privately, and that armed citizens were essential for communal order and defense (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 145, 252; Obert 2018, 7-8).⁷⁷

America’s suspicion of standing armed forces, inherited from British political thought, stymied initial efforts for centralized control of violence in the early 1800s (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 149-153; DeConde 2001, 54-55; Kaufman 2001;

⁷⁷ For instance, 1800s vigilantism, a largely US phenomenon, reportedly arose to counteract horse thieves and counterfeiters. However, 19th century vigilantes largely used violence to enforce ‘local order’ against outgroups, often with the help of local law enforcement (Brown 1969, 63-64, 166-167).

Monkkonen 2004, 40-41; Spitzer and Scull 1977, 21; Thompson 1966, 81-82). The fact that local police and justice systems at the time were often ineffective and tools of political factions did little to garner support for arming police or trusting units with more power (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 150; DeConde 2001, 62-63; Reinders 1977, 88-89; New York Times 1857, 4). Distrust of centralized policing existed in Britain as well, where critics of Sir Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police Force (1829) claimed that police would be used to repress the working class (Lyman 1964, 147; DeConde 2001, 54; Monkkonen 2004, 39-41; Pinto 2015; Thompson 1966, 81-82).⁷⁸

Much like in Britain, policing in the US began under the purview of local governments and was initially left to a few officers, usually constables or night watchmen, with no real investigatory units until the 1800s (Monkkonen 2004, 42; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 149; Reinders 1977, 88-89; Spitzer and Scull 1977). Increasing criminality and working class unrest leading up to and following the Civil War helped change popular opinion, and contributed to the arming and strengthening of urban police forces (cf. Brown 1969, 50-51; Monkkonen 2004, 36-38; DeConde 2001, 55-58; Spitzer and Scull 1977, 21). In the two decades preceding the Civil War, criminal street gangs made use of newly concealable pistols, urban rioters from the 1830s through the 1850s came armed, and shootouts between abolitionist and pro-slavery paramilitaries led to the crisis of 'Bleeding' Kansas from 1854 to 1859 (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 146-147; Brown 1960, 50-51; Jackson 2019, 81; Monkkonen, 53-64).

The end of the Civil War exacerbated local power divisions as a surplus of arms placed guns within reach of a wider number of civilians than ever before (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 153; DeConde 2001, 71). Reconstruction led to neither a massive disarmament of Confederate troops, nor civilians (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 153; DeConde 2001, 68). Laws in the Reconstruction South restricted Blacks from carrying firearms, while armed vigilantes and white militias violently terrorized Black populations without interference from government, and almost always with tacit, if not open, help from local law enforcement (cf. Cobb 2016, 44-54; Blocher and Miller 2018, 40-41, 165; Rosenblum 2000, 297-299; Winkler 2013, 133-144; Cottrol and Diamond

⁷⁸ Peel's model for the London Metropolitan Police now represents one of the first forms of modern crowd control in lieu of the army (DeConde 2001, 54-55; Roberts 1969, 254-255; Tilly 1969, 22-24; Pinto 2015). Critics were correct that Peel's police force was established to serve "the well-recognized dual purpose of putting aside thugs and putting down rebellions" (Tilly 1969, 22; see also Monkkonen 2004, 39-41).

1991).⁷⁹ Black militias of Union veterans were generally out-armed by white Confederate militias, and arms shipments to Black militias in the south were frequently intercepted by vigilantes such as the KKK (cf. Chalmers 1980, 13; DeConde 2001, 74-75; Winkler 2013, 136-139).

The first publicly funded, full-time police department appeared in Boston in 1838, but the force did not fully transform from the constable-watch system into a modern uniformed police department until 1859 (Monkkonen 2004, 42). In the 1840s, policing advocates in New York City also began campaigns for a standing, full-time police force modelled after London's Metropolitan Police. Similar to British and European counterparts, advocates for professionalized police forces argued that policing would prove a more effective means of providing public safety than individually arming citizens (DeConde 2001, 94; Blocher and Miller 2018, 34; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 166). By the end of the 1800s, most major US cities had police departments similar to contemporary models, and a substantial number of city forces were armed (Monkkonen, 53-64; DeConde 2001, 93-94).

However, US police forces continued to be used for political power and white racial dominance. In the south, many police forces remained exclusively white and relied on the same tactics, norms, and sometimes individuals involved in pre-Civil War slave patrols (Hadden 2003, 4-5, 216-220). Municipal police forces elsewhere in the country, especially on the east coast, were concerned with controlling immigrant and working-class populations (Monkkonen 2004, 49-52; Reinders 1977, 90; Spitzer and Scull 1977). Unlike London's force, New York's Metropolitan Police was initially an organ of political contest and patronage, with partisan police forces engaging in armed standoffs in the city in 1857 (Monkkonen 2004, 42-43; DeConde 2001, 57). Biased and weak policing and judicial systems, in short, continued to entrench private armed violence at the end of the 1800s as an effective political tool for local control and resolving power disputes, especially in rural areas. The presence of feuding, crime, and armed labor struggles at the turn of the 20th century reflected individual reliance on private arms in

⁷⁹ During Reconstruction, state and local government and police in the south restricted militia membership to whites and supported Black disarmament by white vigilantes (cf. Kennett and Anderson 1976, 154-155; Rosenblum 2000, 296-297). For instance, an 1865 law in Mississippi, a part of the Black Code, called for the forcible confiscation of guns from Blacks. White militias across the state used the law to violently and extrajudicially seize arms from freed Blacks in 1866 (Blocher and Miller 2018, 36).

the face of ineffective or hostile law enforcement (Brown 1969, 44-50; Kaufman 2001; Reinders 1977).⁸⁰

In the transition to uniformed policing, US law enforcement from the 1830s through the early 1900s reflected a ‘parapolice’ system that relied heavily on private detective agencies and security professionals, rather than fully public forces (Obert 2018; Brown 1969, 56-57; Spitzer and Scull 1977). This was especially true in the case of labor disputes, where police departments and companies contracted private security agencies such as Baldwin-Felts and the Pinkertons to violently break strikes in the late 1800s and early 1900s (cf. Spitzer and Scull 1977, 21-24; Taft and Ross 1969). The prevalence of civilian small arms following the Civil War contributed to the exceptionally violent labor history of the US relative to western Europe (Taft and Ross 1969, 270; Roberts 1969, 267).

Some of the deadliest labor disputes occurred in the mining industry in Colorado, West Virginia, and eastern Kentucky at the turn of the 20th century.⁸¹ The failure of state militias to control national labor strikes at the end of the 18th century led to the rise of the National Guard as a new federal force (cf. Reinders 1977, 97-101; Kaufman 2001, 96; Brown 1969, 56-57). In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson ordered National Guard troops to resolve a labor dispute with the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. On April 20, 1914, National Guard and militia troops fired machine-guns and ignited a fire in the camps of striking miners. Miners fought back, and by the end of the ‘Ludlow

⁸⁰ Partisan elites sometimes encouraged various forms of political violence throughout the 1800s for political and social control, especially in the Reconstruction South (cf. Kantrowitz 2000, 79; DeConde 2001, 57, 75). Community power struggles in the late 1800s similarly used extralegal violence in the face of weak justice systems (cf. Brown 1969, 44-47). Feuding in Kentucky and West Virginia, for instance, partially emerged from disputes over which political and economic elites held local power and access to the profits of rapid coal industrialization (cf. Brown 1969, 44-47; Suleman 2019).

⁸¹ Companies hired private agencies and paid local law enforcement to break unionization efforts (cf. Spitzer and Scull 1977, 21-24). Sometimes these forces used violent tactics that included the physical intimidation, jailing, and even assassination of labor organizers (cf. Somerset 2015, 60, 68, 71; Taft and Ross 1969, 313-315; Wheeler 1976, 79). Labor battles along the Kentucky-West Virginia border from 1912-1921 became known as the ‘Coal Wars,’ and unionization struggles in 1930s Harlan County, Kentucky led to the county’s sobriquet of ‘Bloody Harlan.’ Months of armed fighting during the first wave of the Coal Wars began on April 20, 1912, after miners in Paint Creek and Cabin Creek coal camps walked out over wage disputes, living conditions, and denial of workers’ rights to unionize into the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The Governor of West Virginia ordered state militias to suppress the strike and began sentencing miners through military commissions (Taft and Ross 1969, 313-314, 321-322, 332-335; Somerset 2015, 65-72; Lynch 1914, 648-649). Throughout the Coal Wars, martial law was declared three times, with 500 federal troops stationed in Mingo County, WV between August 29, 1920 and February 15, 1921 (Wheeler 1976, 78). The final stages of the Coal Wars culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain in the fall of 1921, a battle from which the contemporary armed group, the Redneck Revolt, took its name (in reference to the red bandanas worn by striking miners, see Somerset (2015, 67), Redneck Revolt (n.d.), and Sundaresh (2020)).

massacre,’ 24 people from the camp (mostly children) were dead (LOC n.d.; Brown 1969, 68-69; Taft and Ross 1969, 314-317; Crain 2009; DeConde 2001, 113; Somerset 2015, 60-61).⁸² As late as 1946 President Truman tried to use National Guard troops to break a railroad strike, and sought permission from Congress to draft striking workers into military service (Truman 1946; Lichtenstein 1970; DeConde 2001, 159).

City, state, and federal government efforts following the Civil War to centralize control of force, suppress working-class mobilization, and reduce criminal gun violence overlapped in spirit, if not always in practice, with British government efforts at the time. However, US federal policies again diverged in the early 1900s. Rather than removing guns from private hands, as British Parliament began to do with the Pistols Act, 1903 (3 Edw. 7, c.18) and the Firearms Act, 1920 (10 & 11 Geo. 5, c. 43), the US federal government not only permitted, but also actively supported civilian firearm ownership through policies that helped transform guns into mass consumer goods.

Gun Markets and Market Solutions: 1900s to Present

Turn-of-the-century industrialization brought routinization and standardization in gun manufacturing, placing mass-produced, affordable firearms in the hands of even more Americans, including new cross-state criminal groups (cf. Haag 2016, 163-178; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 155-157). During the 1920s, criminal street gangs increasingly relied on the newly invented ‘Tommy Gun’ to fight urban turf wars (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 204; DeConde 2001, 126-127).⁸³ New weapons came alongside the rise of interstate transportation. Railroads and highways brought innovative cross-border criminal syndicates and crime sprees that highlighted the need for federal crime control (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 43-45; Winkler 2013, 193-196; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 188-193; Somerset 2015, 87-89). However, policy responses to

⁸² In 1913 the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company tried to break strikes in Las Animas and Huerfano counties by hiring the same private security agency, Baldwin-Felts, used by Appalachian coal companies. The Ludlow Massacre and subsequent armed fighting in the days after April 20 killed around 74 (Taft and Ross 1969, 314-317; Brown 1969, 68-69; DeConde 2001, 113; Somerset 2015, 60-61; Crain 2009).

⁸³ The Tommy Gun is named after its inventor, General John T. Thompson, from Newport, Kentucky. Retailing for around \$200 (or around \$3,000 in 2020), the submachine gun could fire bullets at a rate of at least 700 rounds a minute, giving rise to its colloquial names: the ‘Chicago Typewriter,’ ‘Chicago Piano,’ and ‘The Chopper’ (Winkler 2013, 190-191; Moss 2017; Stephens 1999; DeConde 2001, 126-127).

perceived crime waves at the end of the 1800s through the 1920s emerged at the state, rather than the federal, level.⁸⁴

As crime and law enforcement had been left to the states, there was little precedent for federal control of firearms in the early 1900s aside from Congressional authority to ‘call forth’ the militia in Article 1, Section 8 of the US Constitution, and the President’s role as commander in chief of militia troops in Article 2, Section 2. However, with President Franklin Roosevelt (FDR), gun regulation would strengthen under a different precedent: federal taxation powers. FDR’s Attorney General, Homer Cummings, worked to pass the 1934 National Firearms Act (NFA, 26 U.S.C., Ch. 53). The NFA imposed taxes and registration for machine guns and short-barreled (‘sawed-off’) shotguns and rifles, with jail penalties for noncompliance (cf. Giffords Law Center 2021; Winkler 2013, 203).⁸⁵ Federal licensing for dealers and prohibitions against sales and possession by felons was passed in the Federal Firearms Act of 1938 (Pub. L. No. 75-785, 52 Stat. 1250 - repealed and replaced by the Gun Control Act of 1968, 18 U.S.C., Ch. 44; see also Giffords Law Center 2021; Winkler 2013, 204).⁸⁶

While a significant emboldening of federal control, gun regulation remained a states’ issue after the 1930s laws. US regulatory efforts at the time were weak in comparison to more centralized European enactments, such as the British Firearms Act, 1937 (1 Edw. 8 & 1 Geo. 6, c.12), which tightened ownership restrictions and banned most fully automatic weapons (BBC 2007; Law Library of Congress, 2013, 90; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 213; DeConde 2001, 147). In the US, internal security remained conceptually and pragmatically devolved to individuals and localities precisely as British gun rights were restricted in favor of collective public security.

⁸⁴ The most famous of early state gun control laws is the precedent-setting 1911 New York Sullivan Act (1911 NY Laws, Ch. 195). The act, named after Tammany Hall politician Timothy D. ‘Big Tim’ Sullivan, is still in effect today as an amended statute (DeConde 2001, 108-109; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 174-175; Duffy 2011). The Sullivan Act was the first of its kind in requiring the statewide licensing of all private, concealable firearms, and it included potential felony charges for violations (*New York Times* 1911; DeConde 2001, 109; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 175). The act was backed by prominent businessmen, such as John D. Rockefeller, and was part of wider social reforms that set factory safety standards, limited child labor, and regulated working days (DeConde 2001, 107-109). Popular support and initial implementation of the Sullivan Act was also driven by xenophobia, as urban crime was associated with ‘lawless’ immigrant populations (cf. DeConde 2001, 107; Monkkonen 2004, 51-52; Winkler 2013, 204-206; Squires 2000, 80-81).

⁸⁵ This act also expanded the Alcohol and Tobacco Division of the Treasury Department to include taxation and regulation of firearms (now the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) under the Department of Justice).

⁸⁶ Additionally, FDR’s New Deal for Crime package nearly doubled the Bureau of Investigation’s budget and field offices, and armed field agents (renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1935) (O’Reilly 1982, 643-645; Stolberg 1995, 404-405; Winkler 2013, 200).

In contrast, Britain passed the 1903 Pistols Act requiring mandatory licensing for pistols, and prohibiting sales to minors, persons with mental illness, and individuals under the influence. The British Firearms Act of 1920 further tightened ownership over fears around the flow of arms from World War I, the potential spread of socialist and working class uprisings from Europe, and internal political threats such as the 1916 Easter Rising (Law Library of Congress, 2013, 90; Somerset 2015, 97; Squires 2000, 34, 43-44). The 1920 act restricted gun licenses and permits to police discretion, and prohibited classes such as criminals, the “drunk or insane,” and persons police deemed to be of “intemperate habits or unsound mind” (10 & 11 Geo. 5, c. 43 § 1 (2)(a)). While a right to bear arms was considered in the 1920 legislation, it was argued that citizens could obtain adequate redress instead “through the ballot box and by access to Parliament and the courts” (Law Library of Congress, 2013, 90).⁸⁷

In the US, however, both the firearms industry and government had incentives to promote domestic demand for guns in the early to mid-1900s. Government action (and inaction) actively shaped the US firearms market.⁸⁸ Unlike many other industries in the US, and most firearms production globally, US arms manufacturers are able to set their own quality standards and are held to no federal health and safety standards (though some production is regulated by states) (Haag 2016, 391-394; Giffords Law Center 2022; DeConde 2001, 95-96; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 106).⁸⁹ In contrast, most European governments controlled gun production from the advent of firearms. By the time of the American Revolution, for instance, French precedents tightly regulated almost the entirety of the firearms manufacturing process (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 16).

⁸⁷ In contrast, President Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929) opposed federal regulations on interstate firearms commerce in the 1920s with a current talking point of the gun lobby: “such a law would prevent firearms reaching those entitled to them to protect their homes while criminals would have no trouble obtaining them” (*New York Times* 1925).

⁸⁸ For instance, Supreme Court rulings in *United States v. Miller* (307 U.S. 174 (1939) at 179) and *District of Columbia v. Heller* (554 US 570 (2008) at 55) explicitly extend Second Amendment protections only to weapons “in common use” (see also Stevens 2014, 129). Yet, the threshold for weapons ‘in common use’ is a circular one, as governmental regulation determines the prevalence of gun use. For instance, handguns are protected by *Heller* as a ‘common use’ firearm, but are only available due to governmental inaction on regulating their use (Blocher and Miller 2018, 88-90). Conversely, machine guns and sawed-off shotguns are not consistently considered ‘ordinary use’ and protected firearms, yet the limited availability of these arms resulted from governmental and judicial prohibitions (Winkler 2013, 285-288).

⁸⁹ As many other sectors fell under federal mandates and regulation, for instance, automobiles, the toy industry, construction, and K-12 educational curriculum, no comparable federal control extended to the firearms industry.

In the US colonies, however, there was little manufacturing consistency and industrial oversight, ensuring “no two muskets were ever the same” (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 40; see also Haag 2016, 8-11).⁹⁰ Contemporarily, firearms were excluded from the Consumer Safety Act of 1972, which regulates nearly every consumer market good and placed industries such as food and cosmetics under federal oversight (see 15 U.S.C § 2052 (a)(5)(e) referencing 26 U.S.C. § 4181; Giffords Law Center 2022; Haag 2016, 391; DeConde 2001, 252).⁹¹

Throughout US history the domestic firearms industry profited heavily from the federal defense market (Haag 2016, 17-21; DeConde 2001, 47).⁹² The US is the world’s leading supplier of weapons, and often sells arms globally with political interests in mind (cf. Wezeman et al. 2018; Bowler 2018; DeConde 2001, 191, 206; Pomeroy 1957). The Small Arms Survey found the US to be both the top importer and exporter of small firearms in 2017, comprising 32 percent of the global market of imports, and exporting around \$1.1 billion of small arms and 15 percent of the world’s ammunition for small arms (Florquin, Hainard, and Jongleux 2020). Wartime private arms sales could also be profitable for government. To help pay for World War I, Congress began taxing non-military firearms and ammunition at a ten percent annual rate beginning in 1919, establishing a precedent for federal taxation of the gun market (Revenue Act of 1918, ch. 18 § 900 (10), 40 Stat. 1057, 1122; Zimring 1975, 135; DeConde 2001, 117). It was

⁹⁰ The expense of European imports is argued to have incentivized early US gunsmithing. The legendary Kentucky/Pennsylvania rifle is traced to Central European immigrants in Pennsylvania in the early 18th century, and is inaccurately attributed to the success of the American Revolution (cf. Haag 2016, 8-10; Wright 1924; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 38-41, 66-67). While practical, cheaper, and a better shot than European imports, the Kentucky rifle was a hindrance in combat relative to smoothbore flintlock muskets, which could be reloaded quicker and thus fire rounds more rapidly (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 66-67; Millis 1981, 22-23, 32; Wright 1924; Somerset 2015, 6-7; Rose 2012). In October 1776 the Secretary of the Board of War for the Continental Congress, Richard Peters, wrote to the Maryland Council of Safety, advising that, “Were it in the power of Congress to supply muskets, they would speedily reduce the number of rifles, and replace them with the former, as they are more easily kept in order, can be fired oftener, and have the advantage of bayonets” (Peters 1776; Wright 1924, 297).

⁹¹ In 2010 a design flaw in the trigger mechanism of Remington Model 700-series rifles led to more than 75 lawsuits, at least 24 accidental deaths, and 100 related injuries. The company refused to issue recalls until a 2018 class action settlement covered some 7.5 million guns with the faulty mechanism (Cohn 2010; 2018). In 2005 Congress enacted The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, which protects gun manufacturers and dealers from lawsuits by gun violence victims (Pub. L. No. 109 – 92, 119 Stat. 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102 and 2103; Goldstein 2005; Lee 2013). As of April 2022, legal repeal and amendment efforts are ongoing, and variation in immunity protections exist at the state level. Families of victims from the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut were able to successfully sue Remington under state, rather than federal, law (cf. Collins 2022).

⁹² The Colt company, which had shuttered its main firearms factory in 1842, was revived by an 1847 federal contract under President James K. Polk to supply 1,000 revolvers for the Mexican-American War (Houze, Kornhauser, and Cooper 2006, 67-68; DeConde 2001, 59; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 90). US firearms manufacturers in the early 1800s also benefited from government contracts that kept industrialists afloat during times of peace (Haag 2016, 17-21).

not until 1935, included in FDR's Neutrality Act, that the US adopted a licensing system for all commercial weapons exports (1935, 49 stat. 1081; 22 U.S.C. 441; Pomeroy 1957, 698; Green 1937; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 106).

Government protection of the private firearms industry, aligned with state resources funneled to civilian marksmanship programs and gun clubs in the early 1900s, exacerbated the scale of private ownership and increased public demand. As with many luxury goods, private firearms and sport shooting in the US began as a pastime of the fashionably elite and upwardly mobile middle-classes, both of whom sought to emulate aristocratic classes in Britain (DeConde 2001, 49; Somerset 2015; Masterston 2017a, 2017b).⁹³ By the early 1900s consumer marketing of firearms appeared in periodicals, with gun advertisements shown alongside domestic goods such as soap and cosmetics, all available for mail order (Haag 2016, 251-255; DeConde 2001, 125; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 99). Samuel Colt launched some of the first gun industry advertising campaigns targeting mass audiences, marketing his guns with appeals to the 'American frontier' (Haag 2016; Winkler 2013, 160-61; Kohn 2004, 84). Even the infamous Tommy Gun, a submachine gun preferred by mobsters of the 1920s, was commercially proffered to the US public as the "Gun that Bandits Fear Most!" (see Appendix 3, Figure A3.1; DeConde 2001, 126; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 203).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s rifle shooting as a sport grew in international popularity, and marksmanship was increasingly upheld as a civic and democratic virtue with benefits for nationalism and defense (Somerset 2015, 11-12; Kaufman 2001, 99; Masterston 2017b). As popular demand grew, gun culture around firearms and social rifle organizations transformed into political lobbies with grassroots support. A motor of this zeitgeist in the US was the Preparedness Movement led by General Leonard Wood and former President Theodore Roosevelt in the lead-up to World War I. The Preparedness Movement lobbied for an increase in defense spending and federally funded civilian firearms training camps, such as the ones established in Plattsburg, New York and Presidio, California (cf. Herring 1964; Gingell 2005; DeConde 2001, 114-115). Preparedness Movement schools also hoped to promote popular interest in the

⁹³ Some accounts claim that openly carrying firearms in the 1800s signaled social status: "one could draw inferences about another's social competence, economic class, profession, and even desirability as a suitor from whether he carried a 'Kentucky rifle,' an 'English shotgun,' or a dueling pistol" (Kahan 1999, 454). Open carry of arms remains a symbolic action. Arms training advises against practicing open carry, as doing so concedes advantage by announcing one is armed (Ramsey 2019).

war, thereby transitioning civilians to universal conscription and military training (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 140-141; Gingell 2005; DeConde 2001, 114-115).⁹⁴

As president, Teddy Roosevelt lobbied for the Congressional establishment of the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice in 1903 (which became the Director of Civilian Marksmanship in 1916). The federal program appropriated funds for yearly shooting contests and appointed National Rifle Association (NRA) members to its national marksmanship boards (Melzer 2009, 36; DeConde 2001, 102-103; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 139-140; Marlin 2013; Kaufman 2001, 100-101).⁹⁵ In 1905 Congress authorized the Department of Defense to sell surplus firearms at cost to members of approved rifle clubs affiliated with the NRA, the latter of whom benefited from the incentives unaffiliated gun consumers now had to enlist (Pub. L. No. 58-149 Stat. 986, 987 (1905); Melzer 2009, 36; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 140; DeConde 2001, 103; Kaufman 2001, 101; Marlin 2013, 218-219).⁹⁶

Far from its highly political and commercially focused outreach today, the NRA began in 1871 as a military association. NRA founders Colonel William C. Church and Captain George W. Wingate formed the social military institution after the Civil War to correct what the two officers saw as a lack of quality marksmanship among Union soldiers and domestic troops (cf. DeConde 2001, 89-90; Winkler 2013, 63-64; Elving 2017; Lacayo 1990; Melzer 2009, 35; Haag 2006, 249-250; Kaufman 2001, 97-99). The

⁹⁴ Teddy Roosevelt ([1913] 1920, Ch. VII) wrote in his autobiography that, “The exaltation of Nogi’s career . . . the great Japanese warrior, contains much that is especially needed for us of America, prone as we are to regard the exigencies of a purely commercial and industrial civilization as excusing us from the need of admiring and practicing the heroic and warlike virtues” (see also Haag 2016, 259-262). While initially opposed to the Preparedness Movement, in an address to Congress on December 8, 1914, President Woodrow Wilson conceded, “We must depend in every time of national peril, in the future as in the past, not upon a standing army, nor yet upon a reserve army, but upon a citizenry trained and accustomed to arms . . . We should encourage such training and make it a means of discipline which our young children will learn to value” (Wilson 1920, 5540; see also Herring 1964; Gingell 2005).

⁹⁵ As of 1996 the Civilian Marksmanship Program (CMP) is a federally chartered non-profit, the Corporation for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and Firearms Safety, Inc. (CMP 2022).

⁹⁶ A 1979 lawsuit from George Washington University student Geoffrey S. Gavett successfully challenged the NRA’s near monopoly on Department of Defense (DOD) civilian firearm sales on the grounds that protected sales amounted to a federal subsidy and violations of free speech (Bredemeier 1978; *New York Times* 1979; DeConde 2001, 208-209). In *Gavett v. Alexander*, 477 F. Supp. 1035 (D.D.C. 1979), a federal court struck down the NRA’s privileged access to DoD sales. However, surplus sales of government arms to civilians continue. Where state law permits, police departments sell used or criminally seized guns to licensed dealers to raise funds for new weapons; these firearms are then sold to the public (cf. Stephens 2017; Bellisle 2018; Vobejda, Ottaway, and Cohen 1999; Olinger 1999). In 1998 the ATF traced 1,100 former police guns to 193,203 crimes (O’Connell and Barrett 1999; DeConde 2001, 288). Surplus sales rose to national attention in August 1999 when white supremacist Buford O’Neal Furrow, Jr. shot six at the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, Los Angeles with a Glock semi-automatic pistol initially sold to a police department in Cosmopolis, Washington (cf. Meier 1999; DeConde 2001, 288).

NRA was modelled after British, Canadian, and German rifle associations to “promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis” among future soldiers (NRA, US n.d.; DeConde 2001, 89-90; Somerset 2015, 10-13; Kaufman 2001, 97-98). In 1871 the State of New York chartered the NRA and provided \$25,000 for the Creedmoor Rifle Range on Long Island, which opened in 1873 and was modelled after the British NRA’s shooting range on Wimbledon Common (*New York Times* 1873; NRA, US n.d.; Kaufman 2001, 97-98; Masterson 2017b; DeConde 2001, 89; Bulik 2015).⁹⁷

In its infancy the NRA hosted shooting meets and contributed to America’s improved international sporting success (Melzer 2009, 36; Somerset 2015, 10-13; Winkler 2013, 64; DeConde 2001, 89-90; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 138-140). Beginning in the 1960s, however, the NRA began to shake its military trappings to appeal to wider audiences and a shifting membership base, which now included gun owners who purchased firearms primarily for self-defense rather than sport (Melzer 2009; Sellers 2018; DeConde 2001, 156-157; Winkler 2013, 65).⁹⁸

In Canada and Britain, in contrast, popular fascination with rifle clubs was not allowed to evolve into a mass pastime (Masterson 2017; Somerset 2015, 96-97). Formed in 1859, the British National Rifle Association (NRA) was tied to the Volunteers movement and initially tried to build grassroots support by leveraging public fears of war and drawing on appeals to romantic national myths around Robin Hood and ‘knightly’ masculine values (Masterson 2017b, 2017a, 615-617).⁹⁹ However, despite some popular appeal, the UK NRA never obtained the mass success of its US counterpart. British firearms use was tied to higher socioeconomic classes before mass restriction in a way it never was in the US (Somerset 2015, 97; Masterson 2017;

⁹⁷ At the time Wimbledon was internationally renowned for a quite different sport: rifle shooting. Wimbledon’s international shooting competitions opened on July 2, 1860 with a rifle shot fired by Queen Victoria (Masterson 2017; Fenton 1860).

⁹⁸ The NRA fully transitioned into a political lobbying machine in the 1970s (cf. Melzer 2009; Winkler 2013, 64-68; Elving 2017; Lacayo 1990; Bulik 2015). In 1975 the NRA established its first official lobbying arm—the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) (cf. Elving 2017; Lacayo 1990; Winkler 2013, 66; Blocher and Miller 2018, 55). The NRA adopted the hardline political approach it holds today on May 21, 1977. At the national NRA convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, an insurgent faction used institutional maneuvers to assume control of the association, an event which became known by monikers such as the ‘Cincinnati Revolt’ (Melzer 2009, 37-38; Elving 2017; DeConde 2001, 205; Blocher and Miller 2018, 55-56; Winkler 2013, 65-66).

⁹⁹ The British NRA still exists under Royal Charter as a registered charity with Charles, Prince of Wales as its president (NRA, UK n.d.). Following the Dunblane massacre in 1996, the late Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, was forced to issue an apology for a BBC interview where he defended firearms: “I can’t believe that the members of the shooting clubs are any more dangerous than members of a squash club or a golf club or anything else . . . if a cricketer, for instance, suddenly decided to go into a school and batter a lot of people to death with a cricket bat, which he could do very easily, I mean, are you going to ban cricket bats?” (Hoge 1996; Moyes 1996; DeConde 2001, 262).

Masterston 2017a, 2017b; Squires 2000, 24-25, 37-39). Contemporary British firearms activists consist mostly of sporting and hunting interests tied to wealthier rural constituencies, such as the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, British Shooting Sports Council, and the Countryside Alliance (cf. Squires 2000, 135-136; Younge 2000; Cohen 2000; Travis 1996).

Beginning in the late 1950s the US established a reputation for a wealthy consumer base with an appetite for surplus guns, and global gun manufacturers increasingly took advantage of the large, unregulated market (DeConde 2001, 155-156; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 226-228; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 29-31, 45; Newton and Zimring 1969, 172-173).¹⁰⁰ In 2016 Bloomberg estimated that around three out of every ten guns that entered the US market were foreign imports (Mosendz, Barrett, and Rojanasakul 2018).

At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, mass shootings entered the US national consciousness, beginning with a 1989 shooting at an elementary school playground in Stockton, California.¹⁰¹ Despite a drop in overall gun violence during the same period, between 1997 and 2001 an estimated 36 mass shootings, predominantly at schools and committed by juveniles, killed 139 people and wounded at least 188 (Goss 2006, 4).¹⁰² Out of 143 firearms used in mass shootings between 1982 and 2012, nearly 75 percent were obtained legally (Follman, Aronsen, and Pan 2022; see also Buchanan et al. 2018).

During the same period, stricter gun control was implemented in both Britain and Australia after similarly horrific mass shootings. On March 13, 1996, in Dunblane, Scotland, a member of a local gun club, Thomas Hamilton, opened fire on a primary school, killing 17 and wounding 14. Dunblane and the 1987 Hungerford massacre led

¹⁰⁰ In his 1970 essay Hofstadter cited an estimate that “between five and seven million foreign weapons were imported into the United States between 1959 and 1963” and “between 1965 and 1968 handgun imports rose from 346,000 to 1,155,000.”

¹⁰¹ On Jan. 17, 1989, in Stockton, CA, 24-yr-old white supremacist Patrick E. Purdy used an AK-47 rifle and a pistol to kill 5 students and wound at least 30 others; on Oct. 16, 1991, at Luby’s Cafeteria in Killeen, TX, George Hennard killed 23 and wounded at least 23 others; and on Dec. 7, 1993, a shooting on the Long Island Railroad Train in New York killed 6 and wounded 19 (cf. Goss 2006, 46; DeConde 2001, 237).

¹⁰² Mass school shootings include: Oct. 1, 1997, 16-yr-old Luke Woodham wounded 7 and killed his mother and 2 others at his high school in Pearl, MS; Dec. 1, 1997, 14-yr-old Michael Carneal fired into a crowd of praying students in West Paducah, KY, killing 3 and injuring 5; March 24, 1998, 11-yr-old Andrew Golden and 13-yr-old Mitchell Johnson killed 5 and wounded 10 at Westside Middle School near Jonesboro, AK; April 24, 1998, 14-yr-old Andrew Wurst killed 1 and wounded 3 during an 8th grade dance in Edinboro, PA; May 21, 1998, 15-yr-old Kipland P. Kinkel killed his parents and 2 students, and injured 25 others at Thurston High School in Springfield, OR; April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 13 and injured 21 others at Columbine High School outside Denver, Colorado (Goss 2006, 4; DeConde 2001, 272-276).

to a government ban on some 200,000 registered private handguns in 1997 (cf. Wilkinson 2013; DeConde 2001, 261-62; Squires 2000, 128-162). Weeks after Dunblane, Martin Bryant killed 35 and wounded 23 others at a Port Arthur café in Tasmania, Australia on April 28, 1996. The Australian shooting led to rapid passage of uniform gun control on May 10, 1996 that tightened private ownership and banned the private possession of semi-automatic and pump-action weapons. A subsequent government buy-back plan successfully destroyed more than 640,000 Australian guns (cf. Wahlquist 2016; BBC 1996; DeConde 2001, 263).

US legislative efforts were comparatively weak during the same period. The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (1994) required federal background checks for all firearms purchases through licensed dealers, but did not set requirements for private transactions (Pub. L. No. 103-159; Winkler 2013, 71; Goss 2006, 12-13).¹⁰³ The exception for private sales is sometimes referred to as the ‘gun show loophole,’ but this shorthand is somewhat misleading as the exemption includes informal person-to-person transactions made outside gun shows, and neglects how gun shows also host licensed vendors subject to federal background check requirements (cf. Maciag 2016; Winkler 2013, xiv).

A year after the Brady Act, President Clinton signed a 10-year ban on the manufacture of ‘assault rifles’ for civilian purchase under the September 13, 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (not renewed by Congress in 2004) (Pub. L. No. 103-322 108 Stat. 1796 § 110102, 110105; Goss 2006, 197; DeConde 2001, 255-256). The law covered ‘assault weapons,’ which at the time reflected an aesthetic, rather than technical, classification for firearms that ‘looked like’ machine guns, but had semi-automatic firing capabilities not unlike that of ordinary handguns (Winkler 2013, 36-38).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ ‘Private’ sales are defined as transactions by anyone who does not sell firearms as their principal means of business. The Brady Act is named after Sarah Brady, who became a pivotal figure in the gun control movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Brady’s husband, former White House press secretary James Brady, was permanently disabled from an assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan at the Washington, DC Hilton Hotel in 1981. Sarah Brady lobbied for the eponymous legislation, which included mandatory waiting periods until 1998, when automated federal background checks were established with the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).

¹⁰⁴ Part of this definitional obfuscation was deliberate and is attributed to Josh Sugarmann, founder of the Violence Policy Center (VPC). In the conclusion to a 1988 VPC report Sugarmann argued that cosmetic prohibitions would garner more public support: “The weapons’ menacing looks, coupled with the public’s confusion over fully automatic machine guns versus semi-automatic assault weapons—anything that looks like a machine gun is assumed to be a machine gun—can only increase the chance of public support for restrictions on these weapons” (Sugarmann 1988; Blake 2013; Winkler 2013, 36-37). Cosmetic

Contemporary gun control in the US also continues to disproportionately affect Black and Brown populations. National political discourse that perpetuated racialized accounts of ‘urban crime’ helped sway popular opinion on gun control and usher in some of the first contemporary gun regulations (cf. Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 257-259). The presence of new Black rights groups, such as the Black Panthers, as well as nationwide social unrest and protests in the late 1960s were initial impetuses for legislation such as the 1967 California Mulford Act, which restricted the open carry of firearms (cf. Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 258; DeConde 2001, 178-185; Winkler 2013, 231, 249-253; Somerset 2015, 76).¹⁰⁵ Congress managed to pass regulations on firearms such as ‘Saturday night specials’—cheaply made handguns popular in poor communities in Detroit—while restrictions on other types of handguns remained elusive (Winkler 2013, 252; Somerset 2015, 79; Kohn 2004, 92).

Black and non-white populations continue to be subject to greater law enforcement scrutiny, institutionally racist policies such as stop-and-frisk, bias in judicial decisions, and disproportionate rates of incarceration and exposure to extrajudicial police tactics and violence (cf. Hinton, Henderson, and Reed 2018; Dunn and Shames 2019; Carlson 2018, 167-169; Cooper 2015).¹⁰⁶ Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic populations are all statistically more likely to be fatally shot by police than white populations, and Black men face a 1 in 1,000 chance of being killed by police over the course of their lifetime, a rate over double that of white males (Edwards, Lee, Esposito 2019; Nix et al. 2017; *Washington Post* 2020; Peeples 2021).

In 2022 guns are part of a mass-based consumer industry in the US that appeals to a range of socioeconomic classes and social identities, even if statistically concentrated among white males. A casual search for gun accessories online reveals the size of the domestic firearms industry in terms of weapons and shooting paraphernalia. One estimate placed the 2019 market size of firearms and accessories at \$6.14 billion, with

restrictions also favored the gun industry, which sidestepped federal regulations by modifying firearms’ appearance, e.g., removing bayonet fittings and pistol grips (Winkler 2013, xi, 36-39).

¹⁰⁵ Following the assassination of Reverend King and release of the Kerner Report in 1968, social unrest and protests occurred across the US. In the ten days following King’s assassination, ‘Holy Week’ uprisings in around 200 cities killed 43 people, injured 3,500, and led to the deployment of 58,000 National Guardsmen and Army troops across the US (Boissoneault 2018; DeConde 2001, 183).

¹⁰⁶ Extrajuridical tactics include, for instance, ‘Operation Clean Sweep’ run by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). In 1988 the CHA began executing warrantless searches of public housing projects. For over three years tenants were subjected to illegal procedures, including being barricaded in their apartments and threatened with eviction for protesting the sweeps (cf. Smith 1993; Juffer 1990; Rosenblum 2000, 311-312).

projections to reach \$9.33 billion by 2027 (Fortune Business Insights 2020). Targeted industry and gun lobby appeals in more recent decades are increasingly marketing firearms to ‘non-traditional’ demographics such as women, who are encouraged to invest in ‘feminized’ purses with built-in holsters and firearms accessories in bedazzled pink (cf. Melzer 2009, 79; Appendix 3, Figures A3.2 and A3.3).

As guns are extremely durable goods, ‘fear culture’ also serves as an important marketing strategy that promotes continuous firearm consumption (Kapczynski and Purdy 2018). Constant fear and vigilance, as well as the increasing sophistication of weaponry, encourages continuous consumerism and weapons stockpiling to build an effective defensive guard against an increasing array of disaster scenarios (Gibson 1994, 89; Lamy 1996, 70-71).

Guns as a Citizenship Right

While patterns of local defense and private violence gave way to more centralized policing from the 1850s through the 1900s, US judicial interpretation did not. Federal courts delegated decisions on firearms regulations to cities and states, contributing to the national patchwork of laws that exist today and thwart gun control efforts. The legal history of private firearms is intertwined with the Second Amendment of the US Constitution.¹⁰⁷ Legal scholarship on the Second Amendment is prolific, but interpretation falls into two general camps: the amendment protects an *individual* right to self-defense through private firearms ownership (cf. Spreecher 1965; Kates 1983; Malcolm 1994); the amendment protects a *collective* right to bear arms while serving in state defense forces (for discussion, cf. Blocher and Miller 2018; Bogus 2000; Winkler 2013, 105-113; Squires 2000, 71-75).

State and Supreme Court decisions have upheld both interpretations, but the former individualist argument is a contemporary invention. In terms of founding intent, debate at the Constitutional Convention between Federalists and Anti-Federalists centered on how best to balance federal and state control of armed forces to provide efficient national defense while retaining popular checks on centralized force (cf. *Federalist*, no. 29, Hamilton; *Heller* (2008), Dissent [Stevens] at 17-27; Stevens 2014, 125-133; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 74-76). Private use of firearms for self-defense was not a topic of

¹⁰⁷ The Second Amendment of the Bill of Rights reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” See also US Const. art. I, § 8, and art. II, § 2.

debate at the Constitutional Convention, and it is likely that the concept of firearms as a codifiable, individual ‘right’ did not exist uncoupled from military service (Blocher and Miller 2008, 23-29; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 76-79; *Heller* (2008), Dissent [Stevens]).

Until the 1960s, legal scholarship viewed the Second Amendment as an arcane protection not unlike the Third Amendment’s freedom from the quartering of soldiers (Blocher and Miller 2018, 59-61; Somerset 2015, 94-95; Lepore 2012). Contemporary arguments linking the Second Amendment to an individual right are instead traced to an award-winning essay by Robert Sprecher in the 1965 *American Bar Association Journal* (cf. Winkler 2013, 96; Bogus 2000; Lepore 2012; Blocher and Miller 2018, 61-66). Sprecher (1965) argued that the individual rights meaning of the Second Amendment had been ‘lost’ from lack of legal attention and the changing meaning of the word ‘militia.’ In the decades following Sprecher’s essay, individualist legal interpretations of the Second Amendment grew from obscurity to a school of thought.¹⁰⁸

The legal precedent for individual gun rights as a human right to self-defense was established by a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling in 2008 (*District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 US 570, 2008).¹⁰⁹ As Justice John Paul Stevens argued in his dissent in *Heller* (2008), firearms ownership as part of a ‘natural’ right to self-defense evolved from common law and circumstance rather than legal precedent (see also Stevens 2014, 125-133).¹¹⁰ The right to arm, similar to rights to assembly and petition, Stevens argues, were

¹⁰⁸ Some of this growth is attributed to NRA alliances with legal scholars in the 1980s and 1990s (Winkler 2013, 96-99; Bogus 2000; Somerset 2015, 111-112; Lopez 2018).

¹⁰⁹ Justice Scalia’s majority opinion argued that the Constitution’s framers used the term ‘militia’ to mean ‘all able-bodied men,’ and thus ‘citizens’ writ large (*Heller* 2008 at 23; Blocher and Miller 2018, 74-75). The case, led by Robert Levy at the Cato Institute, challenged Washington, DC’s 1975 private handgun ban. DC’s unique legal status limited the question to whether the Second Amendment federally guaranteed an individual right to firearms (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 66-71; Winkler 2013, 51-56). Two years later, in *McDonald v. Chicago*, 561 US 742 (2010), the Court completed the process of ‘selective incorporation’ for the Second Amendment by overturning a similar handgun ban in Chicago. The Supreme Court adopted the precedent of ‘selective incorporation’ following ratification of the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments (the ‘Reconstruction Amendments’): the Court decides on a case-by-case basis how constitutional rights are federally enforceable in states through the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 95).

¹¹⁰ There are relatively few Supreme Court rulings on the Second Amendment. Early Court decisions avoided siding with an individualist or collectivist interpretation, supporting arguments that the Second Amendment was popularly understood as applying to individuals serving in state militias well into the 1800s (Blocher and Miller 2018, 59-61; Kaufman 2001, 97). The first gun ‘rights’ case heard at the Supreme Court was *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 US 542 (1876). William J. Cruikshank was indicted for leading a white mob to violently disarm Blacks in the 1873 Colfax Massacre, which killed over a hundred people in Virginia (cf. Federal Judicial Center n.d.). The Supreme Court ruled Cruikshank’s actions did not violate his victims’ Second Amendment rights, as the amendment only applied to national legislation and not the actions of states (cf. DeConde 2001, 77; Blocher and Miller 2018, 93; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 77; Federal Judicial Center n.d.). The Supreme Court ruled on the Second Amendment

collectively conceived as established checks and balances between branches of government and popular sovereignty, rather than as a “common-law right of self-defense.” While representing a sea change in judicial interpretation, the *Heller* decision appears to align with contemporary popular conceptions of the Second Amendment. A March 27, 2008 Gallup poll conducted shortly before the *Heller* ruling found 73 percent of Americans interpreted the Second Amendment as guaranteeing “the rights of Americans to own guns,” rather than relating to state armed service (Jones 2008; Blocher and Miller 2018, 177).¹¹¹

Despite heated academic debate about how gun rights were understood by past courts, the history of US jurisprudence is unequivocally clear on the issue of disarming Black populations. Decisions such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 US 393 (1857) enshrined firearms use as an exclusive right of white citizenship.¹¹² Contemporarily, ‘Stand Your Ground’ (SYG) laws—a legal ability to defend oneself and one’s property with lethal force based on the ‘Castle Doctrine’—remain differently applied based on gender and race (Murphy 2018; Light 2015, 2017; Carmon 2014).

Caroline E. Light (2017) documents how despite the promise of SYG laws to extend protection to populations threatened by private violence, these policies have the exact opposite effect. In examining previous cases of SYG defenses, Light (2017) shows how BIPOC, women, queer, and transgender individuals were significantly more likely to face prosecution compared to white males who invoked the same defense. A 2014 analysis of national ‘justifiable’ homicides by the Urban Institute found women were

again in *Presser v. Illinois*, 116 U.S. 252 (1886), when Herman Presser appealed an Illinois law prohibiting the creation and parade of militias without a license from the governor. Presser had been indicted for marching his socialist workers paramilitary, Lehr und Wehr Verein, through the streets of Chicago in September and December of 1879, the latter demonstration consisting of “about four hundred in number” (Presser 1886 at 254; Blocher and Miller 2018, 94; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 77-78, 167; *New York Times* 1886). The Supreme Court again ruled that Second Amendment rights were a matter of federal, rather than state, guarantees, siding against Presser (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 76-78; Blocher and Miller 2018, 94-95; DeConde 2001, 92-93).

¹¹¹ 91 percent of gun owners, and 63 percent of non-owners.

¹¹² Justice Roger Taney’s infamous majority ruling in *Dred Scott* (1857) reasoned that Blacks were not constitutionally classed as citizens. In the majority opinion (*Scott* at 15), Taney argued that “the privileges and immunities” of citizenship did not extend to Blacks, who were not entitled “to hold public meetings upon political affairs, and to keep and carry arms wherever they went . . . inevitably producing discontent and insubordination among them, and endangering the peace and safety of the State.” Similarly, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in *State v. Newsom*, 27 NC 250 (1844) that a law limiting free Blacks from carrying firearms was constitutional, as Blacks were not considered full citizens under the Constitution and the law’s “object is to preserve the peace and safety of the community from being disturbed by an indiscriminate use, on ordinary occasions, by free men of color, of firearms or other arms of an offensive character.” *Dred Scott* (1857) and similar rulings were overturned by ratification of the Thirteenth to Fifteenth Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 following the Civil War.

more likely to be found ‘justified’ when the shooting victim was a Black male, and even more successful when the defendant was a white woman (Carmon 2014).¹¹³ An analysis of SYG cases in Florida between 2005 and 2013 similarly found that women were drastically less successful than male defendants with SYG defenses, and a SYG defense had “a nearly zero probability of succeeding” when the defendant was a person of color and the victim was white (Murphy 2018, 439).

In framing guns as a ‘right’ akin to other human rights, armed defense groups and gun activists manipulate master frames associated with earlier social justice movements to instead defend particularistic goals (Gallaher 2004, 201-202). The language of ‘liberty’ and individual ‘responsibility’ applied to gun rights repackages racially-coded messages in ‘neutral,’ rights-oriented framings that distinguish ‘law-abiding,’ white users from racialized, criminal ‘others’ (cf. Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 257-259; Omi and Winant 2015, 197-221; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018). In other words, the universalist discourse of gun rights activists supports existing bias in social and government institutions by actively ignoring the demographic realities of gun ownership and gun violence on the ground, both of which are differentiated by gender and race.

While the Second Amendment is specific to the US legal context, the framing of private firearms ownership as a natural right to self-defense is transportable. In 2005 Brazilians rejected a referendum to ban the sale of guns and ammunition to civilians despite initial popular support and the approval of government, the Catholic Church, and the United Nations (BBC 2005; Erickson 2018; Cavalcanti 2017; Kurlantzick 2006; Morton 2009; Goldstein 2007, 31-32).¹¹⁴ At the time, Brazil had the highest rate of firearm deaths in the world, with guns killing one person every 15 minutes (BBC 2005; Morton 2009; Cavalcanti 2017; Kurlantzick 2006). With the strategic support of the US NRA, gun lobbyists in Brazil launched an advertising campaign linking distrust of government and endemic political corruption to fears of government taking away gun ‘rights,’ even though no legal right to private firearms exists in Brazil (Cavalcanti 2017; Morton 2009; Kurlantzick 2006; Goldstein 2007, 36-39).¹¹⁵

¹¹³ A ‘justifiable’ homicide is defined as a case where “no charges were brought, on the grounds that deadly force was appropriate” (Carmon 2014).

¹¹⁴ The ban was rejected by 64 percent of voters (BBC 2005; Erickson 2018).

¹¹⁵ To help sway the majority to vote ‘no,’ the Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property, a minority right-wing, religious, and nationalist party, invited NRA-ILA lobbyist Charles Cunningham to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Morton 2009; Erickson 2018; Goldstein 2007, 36).

Regardless of whether gun ‘rights’ translated to the Brazilian context, the public strategy emphasizing that disarmament would only favor criminals resonated with voters (Cavalcanti 2017; Morton 2009; Erickson 2018; BBC 2005). As pro-referendum, anti-violence advocacy group, Sou da Paz, reflected after the vote, “We didn't lose because Brazilians like guns. We lost because people don't have confidence in the government or the police” (BBC 2005). In an analysis of the referendum, Roxana Cavalcanti (2017, 38) observes that “gun lobbyists in Brazil, as in the US, assiduously cultivate complaints regarding the control of firearms, through a rhetoric lauding individual liberties and freedoms” that draws “on neoliberal discourses of individualism.” As Jedediah Purdy and Amy Kapczynski similarly note of the US context, “the 1970s and 1980s are also a key period in the consolidation of neoliberal rationality, and *Heller* also bears the imprint of this imaginary.” In short, the ostensibly ‘color-blind’ discourse of gun rights interacts with and supports neoliberal policies that discursively and in practice penalize communities of color and lower income populations through the retrenchment of welfare services and prioritization of deregulated corporate interests over worker protections (cf. Omi and Winant 2015, 220-232; Wacquant 2009).

In the final section of this chapter I discuss how systemic and discursive ‘neoliberal’ approaches to crime control and policing emerging in the late 1960s exacerbated popular beliefs in individual responsibility for self-defense. First, however, I finish the historical account of private armed defense in the US, a story which remains incomplete without an examination of new forms of armed mobilization following the Vietnam War. Similar to much of US history, while paramilitary-style groups are concentrated on the rightist end of the political spectrum, armed organization and defense is far from an exclusively white male endeavor.

Armed Community Defense: 1960s to 2000s

Contemporary armed defense groups emerged following the Vietnam War. Throughout the 1970s returning veterans offered arms training to groups such as the Communist Workers’ Party, the Black Panthers, the Minutemen of America, and the KKK (Belew 2018, 26, 63; Winkler 2013, 234-235; Wendt 2007, 323-324; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 237). While the history of rightist paramilitary groups is well-chronicled in scholarship, Black armed defense groups are given less attention despite

existing throughout US history. Black militias throughout the 1800s defended against lynch mobs and slave patrols, and armed defense groups during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement protected leaders in the south, including Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Cobb 2016, 7-9; Wendt 2007, 321-324; Rosenblum 2000, 298-299; Winkler 2013, 143, 235; Cottrol and Diamond 1991, 357).¹¹⁶

Contemporary Black armed resistance movements that fuse symbolic defense with functional community service are famously attributed to the Black Panther Party (cf. Cobb 2016, xviii-xix; Wendt 2007).¹¹⁷ In the Black Panther's (1967) 'Ten-Point Program,' Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale called for the creation of armed community defense groups: "We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups . . . The Second Amendment of the Constitution of the United States gives us a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for self-defense." After parting with the Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm X similarly influenced and continued to advocate for the importance of symbolic armed defense, declaring in his 1964 Cleveland speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," that it was the right and responsibility of Blacks to arm under the Second Amendment for the protection and equality government failed to provide (cf. Wendt 2007, 325-236).¹¹⁸

Before the founding of the Black Panthers, however, Black armed defense units emerged across the southern US to pragmatically combat state and vigilante violence (cf. Wendt 2007; Cobb 2016). Arguing against nonviolent civil rights strategies in 1959, founder of the Black Armed Guard, Robert F. Williams noted, "It is instilled at an early age that men who violently and swiftly rise to oppose tyranny are virtuous examples to emulate. I have been taught by my government to fight. Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone" (Williams [1959] 2016, 213). The Deacons for Defense and Justice first met in Jonesboro,

¹¹⁶ Reverend King was denied a concealed permit license in Montgomery, Alabama, but was guarded by armed watches and known to keep firearms in his house (Cobb 2016, 7; Winkler 2013, 235).

¹¹⁷ One of the Black Panther's founders, Huey P. Newton, wrote on page four of the May 15, 1967 edition of *The Black Panther* that, "black people do not own the means of production. The only way he can become political is to represent what is commonly called a military power—which the BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF-DEFENSE calls Self-Defense Power. Black People can develop Self-Defense Power by arming themselves from house to house, block to block, community to community, throughout the nation."

¹¹⁸ See Malcolm X ([1964] 2007, 155): "in areas where the government has proven itself either unwilling or unable to defend the lives and the property of Negroes, it's time for Negroes to defend themselves. Article number two of the constitutional amendments provides you and me the right to own a rifle or a shotgun."

Louisiana in 1964 as a group of predominantly World War II and Korean War veterans to discuss how to defend against KKK attacks; the Deacons reportedly grew to around 50 chapters across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama by June 1965 (Cobb 2016, 195, 206-213; Strain 1997, 48; Rosenblum 2000, 298-299; Cottrol and Diamond 1991, 358). Similar Black armed defense units, many comprised of returning veterans, formed across the south in the early 1960s, and especially in the wake of nonviolent Civil Rights protests in 1964 (Wendt 2007, 322-324).

Socialist and labor paramilitaries also played a role in US history, though not to the extent of Black rights and rightist militias. The Lehr und Wehr Verein, the subject of the *Presser v. Illinois*, 116 U.S. 252 (1886) Supreme Court case, was formed in 1875 to protect union workers from police raids and state forces (cf. fn 110; Gems 2009, 1932; Pierce 2007, 253-54; Dabakis 1994, 103-105, 128). The Lehr Und Wehr Verein networked with other socialist and anarchist groups in Chicago, such as the Bohemian Sharpshooters, the Jaeger-Verein, and the Irish Labor Guards (cf. Gems 2009, 1932; Pierce 2007, 253-254; Kaufman 2001, 96-97; Dabakis 1994, 103-105). In the contemporary period, the United Freedom Front, a small Marxist group, was responsible for a string of robberies and non-lethal bombings between October 1975 and September 1984 (Seger 2001, 3; FBI 1984, 21-22; Hanley 1984). The Symbionese Liberation Army, active between 1973 and 1975, is most famous for kidnapping publishing magnate heiress Patricia Hearst, but was also responsible for the assassination of Oakland's first Black superintendent, Dr. Marcus Foster, in 1973 (cf. Kotkin, Grabowicz, and Moriarty 1978).¹¹⁹

The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed resurgences of white supremacist networks with violent cells and paramilitary groups (cf. Belew 2018; Barkun 1997, 199-239; Lamy 1996, 123-125; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 266-270). The 1980s surge in hate group mobilization led 24 states to pass anti-paramilitary training statutes based on model legislation drafted by the Anti-Defamation League (Halpern 1995, 91; Rathod 2016).¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ While environmentalists and animal rights activists were responsible for criminal property damage beginning in the 1970s, much of this resistance is decentralized and unarmed (Carson, LaFree, and Dugan 2012; Brown 2019).

¹²⁰ At least 29 states have statutes prohibiting paramilitary activity without state authorization, including bans against publicly ‘parading’ and ‘drilling’ with firearms; and at least 25 states criminalize weapons training for the purpose of civil or political disorder (Georgetown Law 2020, 5-6). These laws are rarely used to disband or prosecute contemporary armed groups. Violent cases involving militias are usually tried under harsher federal penalties. The 2014 standoff at Cliven Bundy’s ranch in Nevada led to a host of federal, rather than state, charges (*United States v. Bundy, et al.* No. 2:16-cr-00046-GMN-PAL, D. Nev. Dec. 30, 2016).

Border patrol militias similarly emerged in the 1970s, including the Minutemen, Civilian Military Assistance, Texas Reserve Militia, and KKK leader Louis Beam's Border Patrol, however, these groups did not gain national notoriety until the more recent wave of border paramilitarism in the early and mid-2000s (cf. Stock 2017, 169-170; Belew 2018, 38, 78; Gibson 1994, 237; Shapira 2013). Armed groups associated with 'radical localism,' such as Posse Comitatus and the Sagebrush Rebellion, also appeared in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Barkun 1997, 199-223; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 270-273; Lamy 1996, 123-125; Childress 2017; Levitas 2002).¹²¹

The Militia Movement is dated with the founding of the Militia of Montana on January 1, 1994, or the Michigan Militia in the same year (cf. SPLC n.d.; Cooter 2013, 45-47). Although embracing similar themes as prior nativist and white supremacist movements, the 1990s militias capitalized on the growing popularity of anti-government appeals by reframing racist, religious, and antisemitic conspiracist narratives as broader anti-elite discourse that attracted wider conservative bases (Belew 2018, 2-8, 192-194; Diamond 1995, 9-16; Barkun 1997, 271-290; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 295-297; Melder 2014, 612; Bennett 1995, 469-473).

The armed Militia Movement went unnoticed until three violent events connected these groups to national security concerns: first, the August 1992 stand-off in Ruby Ridge, Idaho between white supremacist Randy Weaver and FBI and ATF agents, which led to the deaths of Weaver's wife, son, dog, and a Deputy US Marshal; second, the ATF and FBI siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas from February 28 to April 19, 1993 that killed four ATF agents and a total of 75; third, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City (OKC) on April 19, 1995, a date picked to commemorate the end of the Waco siege.¹²² The fertilizer bomb placed by Timothy McVeigh and his associate, Terry Nichols, killed 168 and remains one of the deadliest acts of domestic terrorism in US history. While McVeigh was not a militia

¹²¹ Formed in the late 1960s, the Posse Comitatus ('power of the county') movement was an Oregon-based militia that proclaimed no higher authority than the county sheriff and embraced anti-government and frequently ethnonationalist and antisemitic beliefs. The origin of the term Posse Comitatus is traced to English common law, where the *posse comitatus* was an ad-hoc internal community defense force until around the 18th century (cf. Maitland [1908] 2013, 235-236; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 20). In US history, the Posse Comitatus Act, from which William Potter Gale derived the name of his movement, was issued in 1878 to prevent federal forces from protecting the lives of Blacks in the south following the Civil War (cf. Levitas 2002, 4; Rosenblum 2000, 285-286; DeConde 2001, 92; Lamy 1996, 124).

¹²² In correspondence from prison, McVeigh wrote: "If there would not have been a Waco, I would have put down roots somewhere and not been so unsettled with the fact that my government . . . was a threat to me. Everything that Waco implies was on the forefront of my thoughts" (Herbeck et al. 2001; see also McVeigh 2001; Bacharach 2015; Thomas 1998).

participant, he was involved in Christian Identity and white supremacist networks, and reportedly attended a meeting of the Michigan Militia shortly before the attack (Berlet 2004, 517; Kenworthy and Thomas 1995; Cummins 1995; Vinyard 2014, 266-275; Mariani 1998, 123; Dees 1998).¹²³

Membership (or visibility of militias) peaked immediately following the OKC bombing, with the highest estimate set at five million members and supporters (Belew 2018, 5; SPLC 1999). Federal crackdowns on militia groups significantly weakened the movement by the end of the decade (cf. DHS 2009, 8).¹²⁴ In addition to increased policing, some militia members migrated to hardline neo-Nazi groups or ‘retired’ from activity, especially following overhyped survivalist appeals around Y2K (SPLC 1999; DHS 2009, 8; Freilich and Pridemore 2005, 528; Vinyard 2014, 298).

Between 1996 and 1998 the number of militia groups tracked by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) fell from 370 to 171 (SPLC 1998, 1999). Militia circles closely tied to antisemitic Christian Identity beliefs stopped hosting their annual conference by 1999 (SPLC 2000). Militia counts plummeted to negligible numbers throughout the early 2000s and into the George W. Bush Presidency. However, militia groups reemerged and rebranded with even stronger numbers under President Obama, peaking in membership around 2011. The ‘new’ 2000s militias embraced rhetoric and tactics that further discarded or publicly disguised the overt antisemitic, conspiracist, and religious appeals of their 1990s precursors while retaining connections to the older cadre of Christian Identity activists.

While even implicit demonstrations of political support rapidly disappeared after the 1995 OKC bombing, the newer wave of militia mobilization is sometimes perceived as more ‘moderate’ due to its affiliations with the ‘anti-government’ Patriot Movement—the ‘extremist’ fringe of the Tea Party (Barkun 1997, 287-290; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 1-2; Haider-Markel and O’Brien 1997; Crothers 2003, 1; Vinyard 2014, 305-309). Political lobbying groups, such as the NRA, elected Republican politicians, and top-level government officials have implicitly and openly courted the support of the

¹²³ Timothy McVeigh owned a copy of William Pierce’s *Turner Diaries* (1978), a vitriolic, white supremacist novel about a terrorist organization known as the Order that leads a national revolution culminating in nuclear war and a racially ‘cleansed’ world order. One of the events that ‘awakens’ mass revolution in the novel is denotation of a fertilizer truck bomb at FBI headquarters (cf. Barkun 1997, 270-271; Hoffman 2006, 113-115; Dees 1998, 154; Zeskind 2009, 29-31).

¹²⁴ Across the country ‘common law’ Patriot activists faced large fines, jail time, and fraud and conspiracy charges, including prosecution for ‘paper terrorism,’ such as filing false liens (SPLC 1998, 1999; Vinyard 2014, 293-297).

Militia Movement since the early 1990s (Beachler 2003; Haider-Markel and O'Brien 1997; Berlet and Lyons 2001, 301-303). US Congressional Representatives Paul Gosar (R-AZ 4), Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA 14), and Andy Biggs (R-AZ 5) all have documented connections to the Militia Movement (Broadwater and Rosenberg 2021). In 2020 Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO 3) tweeted, "I am the militia," and used groups such as the Three Percenters for photo opportunities and for security at campaign events (Broadwater and Rosenberg 2021).¹²⁵

At the state level, a 2021 ProPublica analysis of Oath Keeper membership records found the names of 48 state and local government officials (Arnsdorf 2021). The chair of the Multnomah County GOP (Portland, Oregon), James Buchal, made headlines in May 2017 when he publicly endorsed militias as a private security force for his Republican Party members and staff (Buchal 2017; Wilson 2017). In May 2020 armed protestors, including the Michigan Liberty Militia, gathered at the Michigan state capitol to pressure lawmakers to open businesses closed for social distancing measures; armed protests occurred at state capitols nationwide throughout 2020 (BBC 2020; Burnett 2020; Guzman 2020). The hundreds of armed protesters in Michigan, some carrying Confederate and Nazi paraphernalia, were so threatening that state House Democrat Sarah Anthony accepted an armed escort to her office, telling the *Guardian* that "when traditional systems, whether it's law enforcement or whatever, fail us, we also have the ability to take care of ourselves" (Beckett 2020; see also Guzman 2020; Burnett 2020).

As of 2022, gun ownership for those on the right-end of the political spectrum is portrayed as *the* fundamental democratic right that secures all others by ensuring the capacity of citizens to rebel against government tyranny (cf. Mariani 1998, 126; Stern 1997, 111; Gallaher 2002, 101). While right-wing discourse predominates national discussion around gun rights, armed groups on the left often offer more powerful references to the importance of armed citizenries for freedom from government oppression. Black Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton was fond of a quotation from Mao Tse-Tung's 'Little Red Book': "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (cf. Winkler 2013, 234; Wendt 2007, 328; Tse-Tung 1966, 61). Today, the national Socialist Rifle Association sells merchandise baring Marx's quotation: "Under no

¹²⁵ Rep. Lauren Boebert (@laurenboebert) on June 14, 2020 at 5:30 PM: "I am the militia. #2A #WeThePeople."

pretext should arms and ammunition be surrendered; any attempt to disarm the workers must be frustrated, by force, if necessary.”¹²⁶

In this section I first considered the British and European roots of civilian militias as a system of national defense. In contrast to much of western Europe, the US relied on militias as auxiliary policing forces well into the early 1800s. I next discussed how the idea of the ‘virtuous’ armed citizen emerged from myths around the colonial militia system. Nationalist narratives around the armed citizen became reinforced and repackaged over time through institutional policies that devolved policing and denied gun rights to Black populations through citizenship restrictions. Third, I examined how federal government action (and inaction) supported the domestic firearms industry over the course of US history and helped cultivate a mass market for private arms in the early 1900s. Next, I reviewed judicial decisions around firearms ownership and the contemporary turn to individualist interpretations of the Second Amendment. Finally, I briefly discussed the rise of private armed groups from the 1960s onward. These groups are the institutional precursors to the armed groups in this research.

In short, as civilian gun ownership increased in the US, so did popular conceptions of firearms as part and parcel of the American experience and necessary to defend oneself in society. US government not only restricted access to guns among the powerless, but also actively promoted firearms and marksmanship as a civic duty among white males. National myths around the role of the American militia were repurposed throughout US history despite the relative failure of these forces as a system of national defense. As the next section discusses, the narrative of the “civic virtue and military prowess of the yeoman” is recreated in the contemporary US through the ideal types of the privately armed citizen soldier and the criminal ‘other’ (Hoftstadter 1970; Kahan 1999, 454).

¹²⁶ See SRA, n.d., “Store: All Products,” accessed March 2, 2022 at <https://shop.socialistra.org/collections/all>. The quotation appears in Marx’s Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League ([1850] 1986, 273): “The arming of the whole proletariat with rifles, muskets, cannon and ammunition must be carried out at once, the revival of the old civic militia directed against the workers must be resisted . . . Where workers are employed at the expense of the state they must see that they are armed and organised in a separate corps with commanders of their own choosing or as part of the proletarian guard. Arms and ammunition must not be surrendered on any pretext; any attempt at disarming must be frustrated, if necessary, by force.”

II. Social Implications: Contemporary Gun Culture

In this section I discuss how the history of gun regulation and private violence in the US manifests in contemporary racialized and gendered narratives of the ‘virtuous’ gun owner. I evaluate how the transformation of self-defense into an individual right to bear arms, and the transformation of guns into a consumer good—by government, industry, lobbyists, and consumers—is contextually important for interpreting why armed defense is a meaningful action for a subset of gun users. For many members of armed groups, guns now symbolize equalizers of status as well as force.

I argue that individualist and ostensibly ‘color-blind’ approaches to gun regulation create identities and beliefs around gun use that socially and legally regulate guns based on perceptions of the ‘legitimacy’ of the user. Because guns in nationalist myth are instruments of liberty, culpability for gun violence must lie with social deviants or ‘bad actors.’ In other words, as access to firearms expanded through the collapse of racialized restrictions on use, the need to contrast ‘law-abiding’ gun owners with ‘criminals’ became necessary to legitimize widespread private ownership.

What constitutes a ‘law-abiding’ gun owner remains subject to legal debate.¹²⁷ Because violence is distributed across society in both predictable and unpredictable ways, both ground-level understandings and government policy appeal to aesthetic markers for indications of who can and cannot be ‘trusted’ with the tools of violence. From the initial impetus to regulate ‘gangster’ Tommy Guns, to the targeting of ‘Saturday night specials,’ to the aesthetics of ‘assault rifles,’ visual ‘markers’ reflect an ambiguity about how to regulate private firearms along a normative category that does not exist: because all guns are lethal, any gun can be used for violence.

Thus, gun legislation appeals to individualist solutions to private violence that look for social indicators of who might own a gun and for what end, rather than regulating collective safety by limiting the dispersion and manufacture of firearms. As Kristin Goss (2006, 5) elaborates, guns are less tightly regulated in the US than in other countries in the sense that policy penalizes misuse more than it controls access (or is punitive more than preventative). In other words, US regulations establish prohibitions on ‘dangerous’ groups instead of creating exceptions for ‘select’ groups.

¹²⁷ For instance, see Justice Stevens’ dissenting opinion in *Heller* (2008 at 9): “the Court *itself* reads the Second Amendment to protect a ‘subset’ significantly narrower than the class of persons protected by the First and Fourth Amendments . . . the Court limits the protected class to ‘law-abiding, responsible citizens.’”

The cultural resonance of which social identities are tied to the display and use of firearms is one that is continually reconstructed and repackaged by and for contemporary audiences. Cultural motifs around ‘virtuous’ and ‘immoral’ gun users in media and film often reinforce racist tropes by arming white heroes against ‘villains’ of color (cf. Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 258; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018). Scholarship likewise chronicles the conscious construction of the white ‘frontier’ gunslinger by arms manufacturer Samuel Colt in efforts to expand the consumer market of his gun wares in the late 1800s and early 1900s (cf. Haag 2016; Winkler 2013, 160-61; Kohn 2004, 84; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012, 6). The construction of this ‘frontier myth,’ with the help of Colt’s innovative advertising, drew “conceptual links between guns as a symbol of power, status, and masculinity” (Kohn 2004, 84).

The advent of television brought John Wayne and romanticized Hollywood Westerns to homes across the US beginning in the late 1940s (cf. Gibson 1994, 22; Haag 2006, 359-364). Starting in the late 1960s, popular fears of crime were addressed by politicians, the NRA, and media with ostensibly ‘color-blind’ policies and news stories of ‘urban crime’ that in practice consciously perpetuated narratives of ‘black criminality’ for political gain (cf. Mendelberg 2001; Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 258-259; Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020, 4-5; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018, 168). Within the Republican Party, repackaged ethnonationalist discourse capitalized on discontent with President Lyndon Johnson’s ‘Great Society’ through the campaigns of Barry Goldwater (1964), George Wallace (1968), and the ‘Southern Strategy’ under Richard Nixon, all of which expressly instrumentalized racial divides for electoral wins (Omi and Winant 2015, 191-198; Mendelberg 2001, 81-98).

Gun control issues from the 1960s onwards similarly became linked to a slew of conservative cultural policy stances tied to race, gender, and religion (cf. Melzer 2009, 46-48; Sellers 2018; Omi and Winant 2015, 191-198; Ellis 2012 74-85; Kahan 1999, 461-462; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018). The narrative of the ‘violent criminal’ of color is contrasted not just against the ‘lawful’ white male, but also intersects with the alleged weakness and innocence of the white female that requires protection. The intersectionality of these long-standing cultural narratives illustrates how these archetypes are not just about black ‘criminality,’ but black *male* criminality, and not just

white victims, but ‘vulnerable’ and ‘pure’ feminine ones (cf. Light 2017, 86-107; Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020, 4-5; Kantrowitz 2000, 72-73).¹²⁸

News coverage of US gun violence similarly foregrounds interpersonal gun deaths committed by males of color (i.e., ‘gang’ and ‘inner-city’ crime), and in doing so perpetuates popular beliefs and practices around crime and gun use (cf. Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020, 4-5; Mendelberg 2001). These social imaginings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ owners translate into policy and behavioral outcomes. Structurally, ideas of ‘deviant’ gun users appear in racially biased policing, gun legislation, popular support for gun control, and differential application of legal justice, such as in self-defense cases (cf. Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020; Melzer 2009, 34-35; Filindra and Kaplan 2016; Winkler, 2011, 2013, 244-250; Hinton, Henderson, and Reed 2018; Light 2015, 2017; Murphy 2018). Differential treatment appears not just in institutional bias, but also in state officials’ perceptions of ‘threat’ and ‘criminality.’ Unsurprisingly, for instance, Jennifer Carlson (2019) finds police chiefs she interviewed in Arizona, Michigan, and California were more likely to view white gun wielders as supporting their police work, and Black and Brown gun users as ‘criminal’ threats.

The state is not a unitary actor, but comprised of agents themselves subject to social bias, and as such, ideas around who is entitled to defend themselves and in what circumstances, who is fit for military service, and who and what acts are ‘criminal,’ all work to softly regulate private violence. In the US guns relate to white male status in large part due to institutional legacies of white supremacy entrenched through the normative and physical force of law. As this chapter demonstrates, these narratives are not static over time, but are continually contested and reformulated by both political elites and actors on the ground.

For instance, as briefly discussed in previous sections, the individualizing discourse of both neoliberalism and ‘color-blind’ universalism since the Vietnam War penalizes the poor and populations of color by obfuscating and supporting existing systemic inequalities with narratives of individual responsibility. Socioeconomic insecurity caused by neoliberal market policies “is displaced and duly supplemented by the vigorous deployment of the police, the courts, and the prison in the nether regions of

¹²⁸ The deadly consequences of the “rape/lynch narrative”—coined by Crystal Feimster (2009, 4-6; see also Light 2001, 91)—are observed most famously in the brutal lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955; this racist narrative continues to operate in public discourse and popular culture in repackaged forms. Federal anti-lynching laws failed to pass Congress until March 2022, despite the fact that such legislation had been proposed in Congress since 1900 (Granitz 2022; Light 2001, 103-107).

social space . . . The cyclical alternation of contraction and expansion of public aid is replaced by the continual contraction of welfare and the runaway expansion of prisonfare" (Wacquant 2009, 290-91). This punitive cycle creates "a new rationality for the governance of crime . . . organized around *economic* forms of reasoning, in contrast to the social and legal forms that have predominated for most of the 20th century" (Garland 1997, 185).

In practice, new 'market-oriented' approaches to criminology send "the recurring message . . . that the state alone is not, and cannot effectively be, responsible for preventing and controlling crime . . . this strategy serves to erode the notion of the state as the public's representative and primary protector" (Garland 1996, 453-454). In other words, individualist rights to gun use reflect wider popular and political perceptions of crime framed in neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility and self-reliance.

As crime and social problems are argued to stem from 'bad apples,' rather than systemic disparities, individuals become more responsible for their own defense than government in a world of endemic violence. If guns are in the hands of either 'law-abiding' citizens or 'criminals,' gun rights activists can argue that gun regulation only disarms legal users, who are left defenseless to criminal lawlessness (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 62). The presence of 'criminal' gun users therefore contrasts with, as well as justifies, the need for even more 'upstanding' gun owners to defend society, replacing appeals to collective and public solutions for private violence.

From the 1980s onwards political and cultural discourse also began to associate firearms with symbols of American liberty that checked government abuse of power (cf. Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 258; Melzer 2009, 65-78, 98; Winkler 2011, 2013, 66-68).¹²⁹ As discussed in previous sections, the Second Amendment was not interpreted as an individual right by legal scholars or the NRA until the 1970s. In accepting a private right to arm for self-defense, new interpretations of the Second Amendment acknowledge a market logic to policing violence. In this worldview, the 'marketplace of violence' management matches other neoliberal social ideologies: individuals are as responsible (if not more) for personal and communal safety than government (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 155-157; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018; Esposito and Finley 2014).

¹²⁹ This stance is famously embodied in NRA President Charlton Heston's 2000 NRA convention speech where, raising a rifle above his head, Heston proclaimed, "From my cold, dead hands!"

Armed self-reliance can therefore offer a sense of ‘pride’ and ‘duty’ that rests on a belief that individuals are responsible for their own protection in a dangerous world. As Abigail Kohn (2004, 64, 71) documents in interviews with California shooters, some gun users feel ‘demoralized’ and ‘offended’ at the idea of relying on the state or others for protection, sentiments which parallel ‘shame’ and stigmatization around the use of social benefits in liberal welfare regimes (cf. Esposito and Finley 2014, 84-86; Esping-Andersen 1990, 23-29). In the US, just as white demographics appear to be less supportive of social welfare policies when the primary beneficiaries are perceived to be non-white (cf. Gilens 1995; Harell, Soroka, and Iyengar 2016; Semuels 2017), preferences for gun control and application of self-defense laws are similarly shown to be conditioned by the race and gender of the firearms user (cf. Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020; O’Brien et al. 2013; Filindra and Kaplan 2016; Light 2017).¹³⁰

Coupled with the political face of neoliberal discourse in the contemporary US is the increasing privatization (or ‘pluralization’) of law enforcement mechanisms since the 1960s, a trend also documented in other parts of the world (cf. Squires 2000, 28-29; Van Steden and Sarre 2007; Klinenberg 2001; Button and Stiernstedt 2018). Blurred public/private policing boundaries in the US, for example, include ‘community policing’ models, public-private partnerships, increasing use of private data for judicial and law enforcement decision-making, neighborhood watch associations, and corporate security sectors (cf. Klinenberg 2001; Squires 2000, 23-29; Spitzer and Scull 1977; Kaplan-Lyman 2012, 194-202; Tran 2014; Field 2014; Schneider 1999). In short, given the “considerable expansion in the provision of private policing and security services. It is becoming increasingly necessary to speak of a mixed economy of law and order” (Squires 2000, 28).

In the US, neoliberal political discourse and private constellations of security provision also coincided with the militarization of the police and the War on Drugs, which disproportionately penalizes non-white users and dealers (cf. Cooper 2015; Hinton, Henderson, and Reed 2018). Police in paramilitary gear have been increasingly deployed for nonviolent drug offenses since the 1970s (e.g., increasing reliance on

¹³⁰ Research in the US and European contexts consistently demonstrates that individual assessments of whether social welfare beneficiaries are ‘deserving’ can influence support for social welfare policies, and that these opinions can be influenced by how government structures welfare systems (e.g., means testing), as well as how media and political discourse portrays programs and beneficiaries (cf. Aarøe and Petersen 2014; Petersen et al. 2010; Bokemper, Fang, and Huber 2020; Laenen, Rossetti, and van Oorschot 2019; Harell, Soroka, and Iyengar 2016).

Special Weapons and Tactics teams) (cf. Cooper 2015; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 73-77). As Kathleen Belew (2018, 189-190) documents, however, although police militarization started as early as the 1960s in response to protests and social unrest, such changes did not register in the national consciousness until the federal standoffs at Ruby Ridge (1992) and Waco (1993).

What this chapter illuminates in part, then, is the importance of theorizing internal security as a public good with dynamic arrangements of public and private actors and institutions. Welfare regimes, for instance, are frequently thought of as mixtures of public and private provision based in historical context and class bargains (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990; Iverson and Soskice 2009). That class and social power also played a role in how states evolved mechanisms to control internal violence is both logical and understudied, particularly in the US case (Obert 2018).¹³¹

European democracies historically relied on constellations of private contracts and actors to execute the public provision of domestic and international security (cf. Parrott 2012; Thomson 1994; Pereira 2003; Mazzei 2009, 6-7). What Carey and Mitchell (2017, 128) call the ‘Weberian assumption’—that state-making and statehood involves a natural evolution towards centralized, state-controlled monopolies on violence—ignores the reality of how governments continually negotiate, and renegotiate, the purview of state-enforced public security (cf. Parrott 2012, 8).¹³²

Case analysis here suggests we look toward more complex arrangements of violence in society that properly situate the Weberian dichotomy of state power as one with variations. The idea that states consciously choose whether to delegate violence narrates a simplistic story that belies the role of competing factions within the ‘state’ (i.e., unified state actor problem), as well the importance of grassroots actors, institutions, and historical context in shaping the public and private division of security in society.

¹³¹ The US is sometimes posed as a paradox to theories of centralized state formation developed from European history; a puzzle summarized as “weak state and strong outcomes” (King and Lieberman 2009, 548). Despite lacking comparably strong, centralized bureaucratic institutions, the US ‘state’ exerted significant control over US territory by the time of the Civil War. As scholarship on American political development demonstrates, rather than a ‘weak’ state, the US state reflected negotiated compromises between center-periphery relationships that relied on bottom-up mobilization, constellations of public and private enforcement, racial control systems, and military-led expansion of government through colonization and slavery (cf. King and Lieberman 2009; Polksky and Adler 2008; Adler and Polksky 2010; Obert 2018, 11-15; Katzenbach 2002).

¹³² Debate over police reform is one example, though there are many that similarly reflect tensions between state security and individual liberties: e.g., counterterrorism intelligence gathering, use of facial recognition technology, and data privacy rights.

Further, all states control internal violence not only through physical force, but also the normative force of law (cf. Cover 1986). Law defines who is entitled to wield violence and when, and thus who wields violence ‘illegally.’ As this chapter demonstrates, guns are objects historically regulated along highly emotive ethnonationalist fault lines (i.e., citizenship, ethnicity, class, and social behavior). By restricting access to firearms from certain social categories of citizens, the state enables this object to be adopted as an emotive identity marker. The US has ‘thugs’ and ‘cowboys’; elsewhere there are ‘commandos,’ ‘banditos,’ ‘guerillas,’ or more generally, ‘soldiers,’ ‘rebels,’ ‘criminals,’ and ‘terrorists.’ Legal classifications become socially defined ones based on normative judgments of which individuals legitimately access violence.

In other words, institutional distinctions create identities, frames, and repertoires of action that are socially reproduced at the actor and group level. US gun restrictions created salient frames that linked white citizenship rights with private arms. In the US, the social construction of both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ gun owners is historically based around white, heteronormative, male prerogative. Contemporarily, right-wing militia rituals that reference Revolutionary War-era motifs and myths—from names such as the Minutemen and Patriots, to imagery of colonial riflemen—are powerful and salient frames because these symbols connect modern action with a continuous legacy of heroes defined by ethnicity and nationalism. On the left, gun ownership and armed self-defense can be a philosophy of armed equality that not only protects communities, but also serves as a symbol of the rights and opportunities denied to past generations by government violence and oppression.

Conclusion

In the first section I reviewed the history of private firearms regulation and armed defense in the US. In contrast to early modern European gun restrictions, US government loosened class restrictions while enforcing racial ones. In the US, the “banker and bell-boy would kill ducks with the same Marlin shotgun” (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 107). Government policies allowed, and at times encouraged, popular gun ownership. Government policy (or lack of it) helped cultivate a consumer base over time that would sustain, and then entrench, the domestic firearms industry. In the US, private violence was regulated through ethnic definitions of citizenship and oppressive

systems of local control. The political discourse of arms as a recourse to government tyranny was only intended to apply to propertied white men. Over time, state and federal firearms policies continued to link access to private arms with citizenship rights, a process which helped elevate guns from mere tools for self-defense to symbols of equality, legal status, and social power.

In the second section I discussed how insecurity and threat created by widespread gun ownership is socially and legally resolved through frames of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ gun owners. Far from a cultural ‘hangover,’ these racialized and gendered legacies of policing and local control hold tangible implications for the behavior and decisions of institutions, courts, and law enforcement today (cf. Carlson 2019; Light 2017; Murphy 2018; Carmon 2014; Crenshaw 1989; Carlson and Goss 2017; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018). Rather than an explanation for armed mobilization, however, an awareness of the context of neoliberal discourse and social policies instead properly situates beliefs around individual responsibility for communal defense as a result of non-static conditions, rather than indelible cultural traits.

In this chapter I argue that government decisions helped shape and create observed patterns in modern gun ownership and private armed defense. Social pressure for gun rights exists in a supply and demand feedback loop: popular demand develops in response to regulatory decisions by the US state, and mass ownership in turn drives policy deliberations. Gun use carries symbolic power and is subject to social framings, in short, because government regulated private small arms through ethnonationalist policy over the course of US history.

What this chapter also illustrates is why armed identities offer an appealing repertoire for contemporary political action. The institutional link between private firearms and citizenship in US history symbolically portrays the message that “the disarmed group is not equal in the eyes of the state” (Kohn 2004, 95). Private firearms are an ‘equalizer’ that allow full personhood in an age where they are the weapons of the day; and denial of those ‘rights’ is unjust and debasing (cf. Blocher and Miller 2018, 161; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 252; Kohn 2004, 94-97). Being disarmed equates to being vulnerable and weak in a society where ‘every man must be armed.’ Thus, a US adage proclaims, “God created man—Colonel Colt made them equal” (Haag 2006, 196; Blocher and Miller 2018, 161; Winkler 2013, 161).

Guns came to represent equalizers, as Pamela Haag (2006, 196) and others discuss, both despite and because of the fact that “making men equal is presumably what the

institutions of American law and democracy were supposed to do.” Rather than a cultural legacy of exceptionalism, contemporary US gun culture reflects institutional decisions across the course of history that reinforced private arms in the hands of white males as a civic good. The might of guns in US nationalist myths works to justify the use of violence against populations disarmed throughout history (Kohn 2004, 94-97; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018). Such ‘neutral’ and individualistic rights rhetoric negates the historical experiences of non-white populations that continue to experience disproportionate rates of private and state violence.

Socially salient identities around gun use exist because of the institutionalized legacies of private arms as curated symbols of ‘rugged’ hegemonic masculinity; and as tools of the state for the violent enforcement of slavery, genocidal land displacement, and systems of white supremacy. The armed groups in this study are both products and manipulators of these patterns of violence and gun regulation. Despite their rhetorical continuity with US history, however, contemporary armed actors are not products of the past. In the following chapters I examine the worldviews and motivations of armed group leaders and recruits who markedly differ in the constituencies they claim to protect. Rather than a cultural anomaly, these actors reflect how deep-seated patterns of private violence and armed defense can be adapted to contemporary contexts.

3. Relative Deprivation and Armed Mobilization

Introduction

In the last chapter I presented a historical account of the history of private violence and firearms regulation in the United States. While these structural observations are important for understanding salient armed identities today, the past cannot account for variations in contemporary armed mobilization. In the remaining chapters I examine prior explanations from comparative politics literature through a ‘thick,’ qualitative lens. What are participants’ beliefs and worldviews, what perceived ‘threats’ inspire armed action, and do different types of armed community groups appear to be motivated by shared perceptions?

This chapter explores material-based explanations for armed politics in the US. I examine participant accounts for evidence of worldviews and motivations tied to socioeconomic grievances and perceptions of economic precarity at the individual (egoistic) and group (fraternal) level. The first section evaluates economic precarity and grievances at the actor level. I begin by contextualizing my sample from interview data: do my participants report being in precarious economic situations—that is, have they recently faced an exogenous shock to their socioeconomic security (i.e., job or property loss, financial crises, etc.); do participants perceive themselves in objectively downward moving or precarious socioeconomic positions or industries?

On the individual level, participants largely did not express sentiments of personal economic precarity or stress. Participants’ perceptions of their own economic stability are confirmed by an analysis of self-reported employment and educational information: the overwhelming majority of armed group members in this sample are ‘middle-class,’ white, and male-identifying.¹³³ Evidence from my sample aligns with surveys of the Militia Movement, the politically violent right, and gun owners, all of which find firearms use to be statistically concentrated among middle-class (earn \$35,000+ annually), white males with some education at the tertiary (university) level (cf. Oraka et al. 2019; Azrael et al. 2017; Saad 2020; Hepburn et al. 2007; Wright, Rossi, and Daly

¹³³ This is a generalizing statement for brevity in this chapter. As noted in the sampling discussion in the Introduction, my interviewees include one cisgender woman and one femme-identifying nonbinary participant. Three additional participants are nonbinary; one of these participants identifies with both they/them and he/him pronouns (non-‘male’ = 5, n = 29).

1983, 170; Perliger 2012, 98-99; McVeigh 2009, 29-30; Vertigans 2007, 645-646; Freilich and Pridemore 2005; Aho 1995). My fieldwork points to a related and largely unobserved factor in gun ownership and armed mobilization research: guns and firearms training can be expensive. It is therefore not surprising that gun use is concentrated in comparatively higher income brackets.

In the second section I review participants' perceptions of deprivation and grievance related to intergroup competition. I focus on perceptions of group grievance along geographic (rural/urban divides), racial, ethnic, and gender cleavages, as identified in prior comparative politics research and discussed in the Introduction. At the group level, perceptions of economic precarity and relative deprivation do not appear to help explain the motivations or worldviews of my own participants. Although my sample is comprised almost entirely of middle-class, white gun owners, individuals in this research joined groups that advocate for the interests of markedly different communities. Additionally, interviewees placed greater discursive weight on both their political beliefs and the immediate pragmatic need for community defense as primary motivations for membership.

Together, analysis here suggests economic precarity explanations may not fully unravel the nuanced worldviews and motivational variations observed at the micro-level in US armed mobilization. Given the preponderance of guns in white hands, grievance arguments also risk obscuring the very real systemic inequalities in wealth and firearms nationally. As the population of gun owners continues to diversify, more detailed and considered accounting of armed actors' positionality will be necessary to understand the mechanisms and worldviews underlying motivations at the micro-level. Such observations should not be read as discounting the role of economic precarity and relative deprivation in armed mobilization explanations. Rather, data presented here complicates existing mechanistic accounts of how beliefs and perceptions around economic conditions influence political action such as armed defense.

I. Individual Economic Precarity

In this section I evaluate participant evidence for accounts of either objective or perceived individual economic precarity. As opposed to the group-level deprivation explored in the second half of this chapter, some comparative politics explanations for armed mobilization focus on actors' perceptions that their *own* life outcomes are the

result of inequality or systemic ‘injustice.’ To see if these perceptions exist within my sample, I first descriptively estimate the socioeconomic positioning of my participants with self-reported occupational and educational attainment data.¹³⁴ Prior research predicts that gun owners are not likely to be facing objective or absolute conditions of economic precarity, and a review of participant evidence matches these documented observations. While also representing an informal probe into causal arguments in comparative literature, the primary purpose of this summative data is to further contextualize the positionality of my participant pool.

More importantly for comparative politics research, I next investigate whether my participants *perceive* that they are doing individually worse than others in their communities or in their national demographic cohorts. I also review participant interviews for evidence of worldviews framed by economic insecurity. I do not find much evidence that sentiments of individual economic precarity are important for participants’ perceptions or stated motivations for action. Instead, participants appear to accurately perceive their relative economic standing, a majority of whom reported doing about the same or better than others in their communities.

Next, I contribute intuitive evidence that confirms the middle-class income prediction for armed groups in prior literature: firearms as a legally obtained resource can be expensive, and thus prohibitively costly to those facing absolute precarity. All participants who were active in an armed group owned more than one gun, further confirming the informal observations from the previous subsections.¹³⁵

Finally, despite being currently financially secure, are my armed group members insecure about maintaining their economic position in the future? As previous comparative politics literature predicts, I find that my participants are generally pessimistic about the economic future of the US and their communities. However, despite widespread pessimism, actors were optimistic about their own livelihoods. Reported pessimism levels in my sample also did not appear substantively different than those recorded in the US electorate (comparable survey questions disaggregated by gun owners was not available at the time of submission). More importantly, armed group members in this research related their economic pessimism to more fundamental

¹³⁴ Results are aggregated to protect participant anonymity.

¹³⁵ N=26; one participant is a recruit who cannot afford a gun; two militia participants declined to answer, however it is likely that response hesitancy in this case indicates ownership of multiple firearms.

political grievances around government failure and elite corruption. These views are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Occupation and Estimated Income

In this section I situate my participants with wider populations by providing summative and descriptive data on their reported economic positioning. Few of my participants reported facing immediate economic precarity. Of the 27 participants who reported general employment information, 22 were stably employed (82%), three were retired (11%; two militia, one community defense), and one was on disability benefits (SRA member). Only one participant, a militia recruit in Kentucky, reported facing ongoing precarious employment. Among the 24 participants who provided specific employment information, I was able to estimate an income range based on location using May 2020 data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2020a). I first compared the salary range of my sample to national surveys of gun owners.¹³⁶ Overall, my participant pool reflects income distributions reported in national surveys, with the caveat that this sample includes more representation in the middle \$25,000-90K income bracket, and less representation in the highest income bracket of \$100K+ (see Table 3.1).

TABLE 3.1. Participants' estimated annual income from reported occupations

	<25,000K	\$25,000-59,999	\$60,000-99,999	\$100,000+
Left sample (n=10)	10% (1)	30% (3)	40% (4)	20% (2)
Right sample (n=9)	22% (2)	56% (5)	22% (2)	0% (0)
Community defense (n=5)	0% (0)	20% (1)	20% (1)	60% (3)
<i>Sample total</i> (n=24)	12.5% (3)	37.5% (9)	29.2% (7)	20.8% (5)
2015 NFS Gun Survey (n= 1,613)	13%	22%	24%	25%

¹³⁶ I rely on nationally representative surveys from Gallup (Saad 2020) and the 2015 National Firearms Survey (Azrael et al. 2017). As discussed in the Introduction, government tracking of firearms use and ownership is inconsistent, in large part due to Congressional 'gag' orders in prior decades (see fn 3).

Within my sample, 88 percent (n=21) of participants made above \$35,000 a year, and 42 percent (n=10) made more than \$65,208, which was the 2019 estimated average income of non-Hispanic white males nationally (US Department of Labor 2020).

I also compared the estimated annual salary range of my participants to the reported average salary in each participants' respective state for 2019-2020 (BLS 2020b).¹³⁷ At the local level, 71 percent (n=17) of my sample (n=24) reported occupational information indicating they made at or above the average income of males in their respective states.¹³⁸ The remaining 29 percent (n=7) of respondents' estimated income fell below the male average for their states. Among leftist members, 90 percent (n=9) of participants' incomes fell above the state mean, and two (20%) of these individuals made over \$100,000.¹³⁹ Within the small sample of community defense group members (n=5), 60 percent made over \$100,000, while no militia members reported earnings over this threshold.

Out of the nine militia members who reported enough information to estimate income, 67 percent (n=6) of these were below state averages, suggesting that economic grievance is more likely to operate within rightist armed groups. Of the seven individuals with estimated incomes that fell below state averages, only one is a member of a SRA chapter, and the remaining six belong to militias.

Occupational fields for participants are reported in Table 3.2. The veteran correlation identified in prior literature appears in my sample, but is not overwhelming. Thirty percent (8/27) of participants are veterans (1 community defense; 2 left; 5 right), which is higher than estimates of the 2018 veteran share of the population (7%, Vespa 2020), but not as high as some previous research and observations of the Militia Movement might predict.¹⁴⁰ Nationally, somewhere between 44 and 84 percent of gun owners are estimated to be veterans or active military service members (Azrael et al.

¹³⁷ BLS statistics at time of research did not permit calculating average salary by both gender and ethnicity, or for localities below the state level. Thus, state averages compare participants' income to all male demographics in their state.

¹³⁸ N=24; two militia participants and three leftist armed group members declined to answer specific occupational questions. For the two militia participants: one was in an unidentified military occupation, and the other had a master's degree. For the three leftists: one SRA member who declined to answer indicated they were doing 'better' than others in their community; the second stated, "I am fortunate enough to work in a well-paid field"; and the third indicated that they "work in the low rungs of the tech industry." This evidence together confirms the intuition that participants left out of this analysis are doing about the same or better than peers, and thus would not skew overall conclusions.

¹³⁹ One participant self-reported their income at \$120,000.

¹⁴⁰ Two militia members declined to answer this question (n=27). The remaining 70 percent of participants without military service are as follows: n=19, 11 left, 4 right, 4 community defense.

2017; Hepburn et al. 2007). Five participants had served in the US Army, and the remaining three participants were veterans of the US Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

TABLE 3.2. Reported occupational fields of participants

Arts administration: 1 (L)	Law & legal services: 1 (CD)
Automotive service technicians & mechanics: 2 (R)	Metal worker (tool & die cutter): 1 (R)
Chef/head cook: 1 (L)	Military: 1 (R)
Construction management: 1 (R)	Prison guard: 2 (R)
Engineering (civil & metallurgical/materials): 2 (L)	Private consultancy: 1 (L)
Financial services (fraud & payment): 2 (1 R; 1CD)	Protective services (security guard): 1 (L)
Healthcare technology: 1 (L)	Software & technology
Insurance marketing: 1 (R)	(engineering, development & administration): 4 (1 L; 3CD)
K-12 education: 1 (L)	
Labor relations specialist/union organizer: 1 (L)	Service counter worker: 1 (R)

(n=25) See fn 138 for discussion and detail. (L) denotes a leftist group member, (R) is a militia member, and (CD) represents community defense group members.

I also asked participants about the occupations of other members in their groups. While participant responses here reflect casual impressions subject to desirability bias, four individuals offered responses, all of whom were in militias. Pennsylvania militia member Adam (2114037) tells me that fellow members are “educated with some college degrees . . . some are part of the public sector like law enforcement, military, fire/EMT, and search and rescue.” Charles (1080165), a member of the Virginia Oath Keepers, says that fellow members “have a variety of jobs—many are military, former military, law enforcement, and first responders—and range from 18 to 80 years old.” Hunter (TSM: 3354245) estimates that members of his Texas State Militia chapter are around their “late 30s to early 40s, 90 percent male; most members have skilled trades like electricians, some college educated.” And Tennessee militia member Joseph (3753342) says that in his group, “occupations range from homemakers to construction, jewelers, insurance agents, military, police, retired, real estate agents, security persons, nurses, doctors, general laborers, and more.”

Perceptions of Economic Precarity

To understand how participants perceive their socioeconomic position relative to peers, I asked interviewees whether they felt they were better or worse off than others in their communities. Of the 26 participants who answered this question, 62 percent

responded they were doing better (16 total; 4 community defense, 12 left), 23 percent replied about the same (6; 2 left, 4 right), and 15 percent felt that they were doing worse (4; 1 left, 3 right).¹⁴¹ While militia members were more likely to report occupations with income ranges lower than state averages, 67 percent (6/9) of my militia members felt that they were doing about the same as others in their communities.

Although this discrepancy could reflect desirability bias (i.e., participants do not want to admit they are doing ‘worse’), an alternative explanation is that salary ranges in rural areas are usually lower than state averages, which include incomes from higher-paid urban areas. Forty-six percent (5/11) of militia members lived in rural areas where a salary range below the state average could reflect lower costs of living rather than relative economic disadvantage. In contrast, all leftist armed group members lived in urban clusters or urban areas where salary ranges are likely to be higher.

Among individuals who felt they were doing better than others in their communities, Justin (4659213), a member of a Georgia Pink Pistols (PP) group, partly jokes, “if you can’t tell from my socioeconomic status, I am doing well. I am . . . making above the median cost of living.” Liberal Gun Club member James (3469228) says that he is “probably better: I make more money than the average person in my community.” Militia member Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) tells me he is doing “better. Oh yes, a lot of people have to struggle to make ends meet. I am better off.” Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) reasons, “right now . . . I’m actually in the highest [local] tax bracket,” and Brandon (FL Left: 1894948) says that he is “objectively better off. I am fortunate enough to work in a well-paid field, while also working remotely.”

Individuals who said they were doing about the same as others described their situation in very direct and objective framings. Militia member Ken (Light Foot Militia: 1806143) simply replies, “about the same,” and Socialist Rifle Association (SRA) member Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) says that he falls “in the middle. Not super well off, but I’m getting by with a roof over my head and food to eat.” Similarly, Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) says that he is “pretty close to ‘on par’ for my community. Because of some sound financial strategies, I am a bit more recession and inflation ‘proof’ than most in my tax bracket,” and Hunter (3354245), a Texas State Militia member, tells me that he is “better than some, worse than others. I don’t worry about where I fit on the

¹⁴¹ All three participants without data are in militias. One respondent did not answer this question. The other two participants were interviewed at the beginning of data collection when my interviews did not yet include this question.

ladder. I just try and help people where I can, save for the future, and spend a little on myself occasionally.”

Of the four participants who felt they were doing worse than others in their community, the responses were similarly framed in fairly neutral assessments. SRA member Jordan (MI SRA: 4572657) says that economically they are “average in my trailer park but poor in my city,” and Adam (PA Militia: 2114037) tells me that it is all about “perspective. I’m alive, healthy enough to formulate thoughts that I can then type up and send using email and internet—all in the comfort of my home. There are still struggles though, such as making ends meet and getting out of ‘paycheck to paycheck’ modality.”

Two additional individuals are exceptions to the largely stable economic positioning reported by the majority of participants. Brian (III%/KSM Recruit: 4831771) was being recruited to join a local militia, but could not meet the requirements for membership until he had saved enough money to afford a firearm. Brian worked in precarious and temporary service positions, often paid on hourly minimum wages. The second individual, a leftist armed group member, was on disability benefits. In addition to these two individuals, another two interviewees shared that, despite being in stable financial positions at the moment, they had overcome homelessness and drug addiction. Both of these individuals, one a member of a leftist group and another a member of a militia, decided to become members of their armed groups when they had reached a more financially stable point in their lives.¹⁴²

Several individuals in my research recounted how they faced economic insecurity and job transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of layoffs or business closures, however, all of these individuals had joined their armed group before the onset of the pandemic. When I ask how they were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, Alex (JBGC: 4770945), who joined the John Brown Gun Club (JBGC) in September 2019, tells me, “my nephew got Covid and spent his 16th birthday in an induced coma. I lost my job in December 2020 and almost lost my home. I’m way more depressed and anxious, and worry it’s made permanent changes to my mental health.” Fellow JBGC chapter member William (1390238), who joined in 2017, tells me that due to Covid-19 he “was furloughed from my job for 15 months, which was difficult.” Another militia

¹⁴² While not investigated in this research, past experiences of precarity, particularly the acute conditions recounted here, would seem likely to have some influence on political attitudes and behavior.

member faced a significant decline in income and status in 2020 due to Covid-19 lockdowns. Ken (Light Foot Militia: 1806143) tells me he was “forced into part-time employment because of Covid.” However, similar to William, Ken had joined his unit of the Light Foot Militia in 2017.

In short, while participants shared past and current experiences of objective economic precarity, an analysis of narrative accounts suggests that the individuals in this research largely joined armed groups when they were in relatively stable financial positions and experiencing less economic precarity than at other points in their lives.

Education

In the US educational attainment is a well-established proxy of both social class and income. Education is highly correlated with lifetime earnings and unemployment rates, reflecting inequality in access to post-secondary education, as well as resource disparities across K-12 school districts (cf. Tamborini, Kim, and Sakamoto 2015; Porter 2014; Bolognini and Makowiecki 2014; Torpey 2018).¹⁴³ Based on the above analysis of participants’ estimated incomes, we would expect individuals in my sample to have some university or trade school certifications (tertiary education), rather than just a high school diploma (secondary).

I find this to be the case. Ninety-three percent (26/28) of participants reported having some tertiary education (including non-completes) or holding a trade certification. Of the three individuals with only a high school degree, one was trying to join a militia, and two were members of leftist groups (see Table 3.3). In aggregate, participants in my sample reported higher levels of university, postgraduate, and professional school experience compared to representative surveys of gun owners and the national non-Hispanic white male population (US Census Bureau 2020).¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Earning potential tied to education level also unsurprisingly intersects with gender, race, and ethnicity (cf. Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011).

¹⁴⁴ The US Census allows selection of more than one race/ethnicity. The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) notes that ‘white’ “includes any individual who indicates that he/she is white regardless of being Hispanic or Latino,” while ‘non-Hispanic white’ “includes individuals who indicated that they were white but did not indicate that they were Hispanic or Latino.” According to 2019 Census data, approximately 6 percent of the national non-Hispanic white male population over the age of 25 did not hold a high school diploma. This percentage is not reported above as all of my participants hold at least a high school degree or equivalent.

TABLE 3.3. Reported educational attainment of participants

	High school, no university % (n)	Some university	University graduate (including some post-grad)	Degree beyond university/post-grad	Associate/trade school/certificate
Left sample (n=13)	15% (2)	31% (4)	15% (2)	23% (3)	15% (2)
Right sample (n=10)	10% (1)	10% (1)	50% (5)	10% (1)	20% (2)
Community defense (n=5)	0% (0)	0% (0)	40% (2)	60% (3)	0% (0)
<i>Total sample (n=28)</i>	<i>11% (3)</i>	<i>18% (5)</i>	<i>32% (9)</i>	<i>25% (7)</i>	<i>14% (4)</i>
Census 2019 (white males 25+)	28%	16%	25%	15%	10%
Gallup 2020 (n=1,035)	31%	34%	35%	26%	<i>No data/not separated</i>
NFS 2015 (n= 2,072)	34%	26%	20% (university & post-grad.)		<i>No data/not separated</i>

Academic disciplines of participants with post-secondary or associate experience:

Criminal sciences, police science (1 R; 1 CD)
 Engineering (metallurgy and mechanical) (2 L; 1 CD)
 Law/Juris Doctor (1 CD)
 Mechanics (1L; 1 R)
 Physical sciences (neuroscience, microbiology, chemistry) (2 L; 1 R)
 Social sciences (history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, political science, and management) (2 L; 1 R; 2 CD)

Seven individuals in my sample held advanced degrees. Two leftist group members had doctoral degrees in Cognitive Neuroscience and Microbiology, and one of my community defense group members held a Juris Doctor (JD) degree.¹⁴⁵ An additional member of a socialist armed group indicated that several members of his group were doctoral students (Jeff, KY Left: 2867389).

Higher education levels in my sample could reflect sampling bias (i.e., armed groups or members with higher education levels may be more likely to participate in academic research). However, these observations more likely support empirical findings that activists and leaders of social movements tend to display higher education and income levels, and thus may display more belief-oriented motivations for action (cf.

¹⁴⁵ The four remaining individuals had completed a master's degree.

Dobratz 1997, 26; Mueller 2018, 13-14; Stern 1997, 119). This latter intuition is supported by previous scholarship on the Militia Movement that documents either no relationship between militia mobilization and education levels, or *higher* formal education levels among militia members compared to social peers and the national population (cf. Aho 1995, 139-145; Cooter 2013, 18-19; Melder 2014; O'Brien and Haider-Markel 1998; Freilich 2001).

Given the small size of many armed groups and the relative economic security of the gun owning population, prior research seems to predict that 'rank-and-file' militia members not sampled here would similarly display higher educational attainment rates. However, further research and a larger sample size would be needed to confirm any relationships between education and mobilization. Overall, the educational attainment data analyzed here supports the conclusion drawn from occupational data: the majority of armed group members in this research did not report being in positions of objective or absolute economic precarity.

Gun Costs

A final observation from fieldwork supports the argument that armed group membership is not easily explained by objective economic precarity: firearms training is not a cheap endeavor. In 2018 a decent, mid-range handgun was priced at around \$500, although it was possible to find cheaper models near the \$100 price point, as well as deals on the used market (Willis 2018; Gilroy 2016). When the 2015 National Firearms Survey (NFS) asked gun owners how much they had spent on a recent firearm purchase, responses were "relatively evenly distributed around the mode of \$250 to \$500" (Azrael et al. 2017, 47).

Rarer guns with tighter regulations can cost over \$1,000 (Azrael et al. 2017, 51). One participant tells me how machine guns "are exorbitantly expensive. An entry level, if you will, machine gun, runs about \$9,000 dollars right now, and the transfer paperwork takes eight months (with a \$200 fee). So, they are attainable, but it's difficult. A well-meaning collector could get his hands on one; a white nationalist would have a hard time getting a legal one" (Justin, GA PP: 4659213).

Added to the cost of firearms are the expenses of ammunition, accessories for cleaning and responsible storage (e.g., home and car safes), state and/or federal

processing fees for permits, and, of course, regular range or hunting license fees.¹⁴⁶ Ammunition and necessary gun accessories (e.g., hearing and eye protection) can set regular gun owners back an additional \$200 or more a year (cf. Gilroy 2016).

When I ask William (JBGC: 1390238) how often he goes shooting, Will shares that he “used to go shooting about every week, but with ammo prices being what they are at the moment, I’m lucky if I can go every other week. I belong to a club that has an outdoor rifle and pistol range and an indoor pistol range. I spend more time at the pistol range because pistol shooting takes more practice to stay competent. It’s a happy coincidence that pistol ammunition costs about half as much per round as rifle ammunition.” Steve (GA SRA: 4907149) similarly tells me that “before the ammo prices skyrocketed, I used to shoot about once a month. Since the pandemic hit, I have gone to the range once.”

The costs of firearms and munitions tallies even higher when accounting for the fact that the statistically average gun owner possesses more than one firearm (Azrael et al. 2017, 43; Hepburn et al. 2007; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 11). All of my participants owned more than one firearm except for one individual, Brian (III%/KSM recruit: 4831771), who was saving money to buy a gun so he could join a militia in Kentucky. Many militias require members to own at least two firearms. As David (KDLM: 1342898) tells me, “minimally everyone throughout the entire commonwealth that is part of KSM [Kentucky State Militia] is all equipped with a full battle kit that includes, you know, a long arm and a short arm.”¹⁴⁷ A socialist armed group member in Kentucky, Jeff (2867389), also confirms that the militias in his state appear very well-armed: “I mean, materially, they also have way more to lose. You know, they are probably making much more than we do. I mean, you don’t get all that shit without having, like, thousands of dollars of disposable income.”

Within my sample, Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342), a firearms trainer, is one of the individuals who reports owning the most guns. He tells me he has “about 40 firearms. Roughly a third of them were inherited from my father—most of those are old hunting

¹⁴⁶ To give an idea of costs, from January 2021 through April 2022 a popular range in central Kentucky, Bud’s Gun Shop, offered a rate of \$20/hr per shooter, per lane, with a \$12.50 charge for a second and third individual (Bud’s 2022a). Ammunition and firearms are brought from home or purchased/rented in-store at additional cost. Items such as machine guns that are difficult to own privately are rented. A Tennessee Bud’s Gun Shop advertises a \$100 machine gun package that includes 30 minutes of range time, 60 rounds of ammunition, and a T-shirt reading: “I went full-auto at Buds Gun Shop & Range” (as of April 2022, Bud’s 2022b).

¹⁴⁷ At the time of interview the Kentucky State Militia was a statewide organization affiliated with the Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia.

guns: .22 rifles, a few handguns, a few shotguns. Two of my rifles are antiques. A handful of my guns are training or hunting in nature: .22 rifles, shotguns, etc. I own a number of handguns, several of which I carry and my wife carries. I also own over ten different AR-15 rifles. Most of my handguns and AR-15 rifles make their way to the classes I teach as loaners.” In case these numbers seem intimidating, it is worth remembering that as a firearms instructor Joe (TN Militia: 3753342) will “often have to loan out guns to those whose guns experience major failures in class,” as well as buy firearms for professional experience, such as a rifle “purchased for hunting and precision training classes and practice.”

Far from purchasing power being concentrated on the right, Pink Pistols member Justin (GA PP:4659213) tells me that he likes “things that turn heads. I have a couple of very collectible pistols, as well. I do trap shooting sometimes. I am not very good at it, but I have an expensive shotgun for it. One of those things that, like, sometimes I make more money than I know what to do with and I like buying guns and experimenting with niche markets of guns. So, like, collectible Czechoslovakian stuff, so that’s my latest . . . I like things that go boom, like uncommon things.” When I ask Justin (GA PP: 4659213) what his favorite gun is, he tells me:

Probably my favorite and the first that comes to mind, and mostly because I like showing it off, is an HK P7 [Heckler & Koch pistol], which is incredibly expensive and hard to get, or at least difficult. You don’t see them in the wild very often because it has an interesting squeeze-cocking mechanism that made it an incredibly accurate, very light trigger pull. It was featured in a couple movies in the ‘80’s, but the retail price in 1983 was like \$1,100, so they did not sell particularly well. Nowadays they are like over \$2,000 dollars . . . when I saw one come up for sale [at a] good price, I grabbed it. One of those things that I know their value continues to go up, and it has such an intriguing design that I wanted to have one . . . it was imported through HK before they stopped doing that. It’s a very rare and unique design, and it’s pretty cool to show off. People don’t see it often.¹⁴⁸

As Massachusetts Pink Pistols member Nick (MA PP: 2910720) similarly explains, “when I first got my license to carry, I never imagined I would own multiple guns. I think there is sometimes a perception that people with multiple guns are ‘stockpiling’ them for some nefarious purpose, but you can’t practically use more than one at a time. It’s more like how someone might own multiple pairs of shoes, or, if I had a lot more disposable income, multiple cars. Each is interesting to me for a different reason. My

¹⁴⁸ The 2020/2021 value of HK P7s at around \$2,000 or more is confirmed in Sagi (2021).

.22 rifle would likely be very ineffective at stopping an armed home invader, but I can teach a new shooter on it without them being worried about recoil or it being exceedingly loud, and pay very little for ammo in the process.”

Leftist group member Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) tells me, in reference to his own purchasing habits, that “the other thing about having guns is that you always kind of want $n+1$ guns [laughs]. Which is stupid, but it’s the case [laughs]. Right? So, like, in the back of my mind, I have *reasons* for why I need an AK-47 that aren’t real [laughs].” JBGC member William (JBGC: 1390238) also notes the consumerist impulse with gun buying, telling me that during the pandemic he “semi-accidentally won an auction for a firearm I don’t really need because I got caught up in the auction mindset and bid a little more than I should have without stopping to think about it. It’s a firearm that will replace one I already own, which I will have to sell to help offset the cost. I am not proud of falling prey to ‘Auction Brain!’”

One of Paul’s (Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership (JPFO): 4489478) favorite guns is one that is entirely impractical for daily use. He tells me, “I reckon I was always sort of a recoil junkie, and in my safe I have this monstrous revolver, which is .45-70 caliber—which is a great big round—and it’s a revolver that is ideal for what’s called silhouette shooting. So, at a hundred yards, you shoot at a piece of steel. So, it’s a long range revolver, and it is a magnificent piece of engineering . . . it is a magnificent piece of equipment.” Similarly, Jacob (WI SRA: 3309261) shows me his bright blue AR-15 during a video call: “they usually opt for black, though I am little more flashy . . . Like, I understand if we are at the point shit has hit the fan and I am in an urban environment, it’s not going to make a difference what color my gun is, and that’s a pretty shade of blue [laughs] . . . Yes, it’s not going to get lost in the pile of other guns, right?”

Due to the durable nature of guns and the ability for some models to appreciate in value, firearms bought for leisure, sporting, and self-defense also represent financially sound investments. As gun owner Daniel (Firearms Trainer: 3864133) summarizes toward the end of our interview, “I’m not rich, but my guns and my ammunition are worth more than my house in value. And I can’t give this up. I mean, that would be ludicrous on my part. I use my firearms like people back in the day used to use silver and gold: it’s my investment. If I have for some reason a hard month, well, I walk through my safe and, say, okay, this firearm has got to go now. I got to pay bills. You know?”

In conclusion, all of the above aligns with well-documented observations that gun owners and armed groups in the US appear to be disproportionately white, male, and not substantially economically deprived. Beyond this, armed group members in my research overall demonstrate enough disposable income to not only own multiple guns, but also to purchase firearms as leisure goods. Far from specific to the US, the scenario above describes how a demographic with disproportional access to resources (in this case firearms) is likely to accumulate and use these goods to protect both individual and communal interests.

In this section I reviewed participants' relative economic positioning using estimated annual income, self-reported economic status (better, same, or worse), and educational attainment data. As similarly observed in prior literature, my participants primarily appear to be economically stable white males. The cost of guns, coupled with the need for spare time and access to safe shooting spaces, may also help explain why armed group demographics skew older in many samples (the average age of my participants is 42).¹⁴⁹ Additionally, participants accurately perceived their own economic standing, and most felt that they were doing about the same or even better than others in their community. However, despite feeling secure in current circumstances, do individuals fear future threats to their economic security? In the next section I review interviews for evidence of mobilization tied to perceptions of socioeconomic decline and economic pessimism.

Assessments of Future Precarity

As discussed in the introduction to this section, relative deprivation is also argued to encourage political action if actors perceive they may face economic losses or precarious situations in the future. For instance, a skilled industrial worker may be stably employed at the moment but worry about the future of his career in ten years. Or a currently thriving business owner in a 'rust belt' town may worry about the effects of out-migration as industries unrelated to their own relocate. As argued across comparative politics research, optimism about the future can suppress incentives for action, while pessimism can increase motives to act.

¹⁴⁹ Militia members skewed older (mean = 48) than leftist participants (mean = 35) and members of community defense groups (mean = 44).

In contrast to the sections above, I find discursive evidence that participants are concerned with macroeconomic downturns, as well as pessimistic about the economic future of their communities. However, in an evaluation of participant interviews, I find economic pessimism in this sample stems from a worldview based in political distrust. Rather than focusing on concerns about their own economic positioning, participants instead consistently underscored how they do not trust government agencies to maintain living conditions across the national population.

During my interviews I asked participants whether they were optimistic about the economic future of their communities and the US as a whole (n=26).¹⁵⁰ Participants were generally pessimistic about the future of the economy (65%, 17/26); 15 percent (n=4) of participants said the economy would stay about the same, and 19 percent (5/26) responded that they were optimistic. Leftist armed participants and militias were the most pessimistic about the economy at 77 percent (10/13), and 78 percent (7/9) respectively. These two groups were also the only ones who reported optimism. Twenty-two percent (2/9) of militia members were optimistic, and 23 percent (3/13) of leftist group participants were optimistic.¹⁵¹ All community defense group members (n=4) reported they felt the economy would stay about the same. In aggregate, the 65 percent pessimism measured across my sample matches national surveys of economic pessimism, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Gallup polling from December 2021 similarly found that around 67 percent of Americans felt the economy was getting worse (Brenan 2021; comparable gun owner surveys were not available at the time of submission).

Among the more optimistic militia members in my sample, one of these individuals was interviewed in 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting their answers might be different now (David, Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia (KDLM): 1342898). For instance, a different militia member, Josh (WV Militia: 1768333), who lives in a neighboring state, tells me that “the economy overall in the country was doing great until this coronavirus hit.” Similarly, another participant who felt the economy would be ‘about the same’ indicated that their assessment considered the effects of the pandemic: “once this lockdown is over with and everything goes back to the old normal,

¹⁵⁰ Two militia participants declined to answer, and one community defense member interview ran out of time before the question was asked.

¹⁵¹ As discussed in the next chapter, higher rates of economic pessimism among leftist members may be due in part to Marxist and socialist political beliefs.

I think we will be fine. It will take a year or two to restore it to where it was, but it will be fine" (Ken, Light Foot Militia: 1806143).

One optimistic individual on the left notes how their positive assessments are only in reference to their own immediate economic positioning, and that for others in society, such as those in the service industry, the economic future is not as bright (Jacob, WI SRA: 3309261). More much common on the left are answers like those from SRA member Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613). When I ask if he is optimistic about the economic future of his community, Tyler replies, "No. I think we're nearing another major economic recession and the repercussions will be felt by everyone." Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) tells me, "Yeah, I mean, it's pretty bleak," while most simply respond "no." Even an individual who I count as feeling the economy will do about the same caveats their relative hopefulness in their response: "Slightly, I can't quite call it optimistic" (James, Liberal Gun Club: 3469228).

Given the pessimism recorded above, many participants unsurprisingly recounted economic decline in their local communities and states. Militia member Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) tells me that his town used to be a rich community, but "now it's, *yeeeeeah*—it's a shell of its—we don't have a bunch of abandoned buildings or anything; most of those fell in the river I guess [laughs]." When I ask what industry left his area, Josh replies, "gas and oil. And we still have a lot of that around here, but not near as much—it's on the outskirts. You know, all this fracking and stuff going on." East Kentucky Militia member Matt (4359402) responds quickly when I ask about the biggest issue facing his community:

Jobs. I mean, it wasn't for everybody, but there was enough mining jobs in eastern Kentucky, it'd employ everybody and their family tree. And then, you know, that dwindled out—but it got phased out without putting anything else in place. And that right there sent it down the wrong road, and then that just made the place depressed. And now their biggest problem back home is the drugs. But I mean, it took 10, 15, 20 years to get to the state that it's in now and, you know, now if you're living in eastern Kentucky, you either lucked out and got a good job somehow, or you're retired, or you're a dependent living off your mother and father.

Those on the left with pessimistic economic perceptions provided similar accounts of decline. When I ask Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) what the major issues are in his community and state, he shares that "large regions of Pennsylvania still suffer economically due to the outsourcing of steel production, and coal mining is not the

industry it once was. Unfortunately, the new jobs coming into areas like Northeastern Pennsylvania are things like fracking, which is also terrible for the environment. The biggest issues in our largest cities, particularly Philadelphia, tend to be homelessness and drug addiction.” Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) similarly tells me that “almost every Kentuckian is doing worse than they were 20 years ago.” Jeff explains that “almost all of the large, heavy industry . . . have closed in the last 20 years. One of the plants is fixing to move to Mexico. So, the economy is very different than it was when I was growing up here . . . it’s very much your kind of average, kind of rust belt, upper-south/mid-south city where there’s no real industrial base anymore.”

Substantively, however, participant narratives of why they decided to join armed groups did not prioritize or reference economic grievances as motivating reasons for action. Only four participant interviews described their membership with accounts that come close to matching a narrative of economic precarity described in prior political research. When I ask SRA member Taylor (MI SRA: 4958846) if they are doing better or worse than others in their community, they reply that they “have been lucky so far, but that could change at any time.” In follow-up questions, however, when I ask whether they are optimistic about the economic future of their community, Taylor replies with much wider concerns about environmental collapse: “No. My state is somewhat shielded from climate change, but we’re going to get fucked just like everyone else. Both people and the economy.”

Similarly, when I ask JBGC member Alex (4770945) about the major issues facing the US and their state, they reply, “the capitalist class is keeping people poor and dying. Our planet is being destroyed by a handful of billionaires and they are not the ones who will pay the price. In [our state], we’re dealing with record homelessness and drug overdoses. Police brutality and systemic racism seem to be invisible to most of the country—like, people don’t believe BIPOC are killed at a significantly higher rate than white people.”

Two militia participants also explicitly linked their own armed defense to concerns of national economic decline. Drew (Watchmen: 2170513) tells me that he bought firearms during the Covid-19 pandemic because he “was concerned that people losing jobs would lead to an increase in robbery for survival.” Similarly, David (KDLM: 1342898) says that when he moved to Kentucky he decided to join a militia because, “[I] came here during Obama . . . during a time of recession. I came here during a time of, when there were many fears on the conservative side of our political sector that things

were going to go awry. I knew that if there was unrest, similar to Ferguson . . . I could not protect myself alone.” Similar to SRA member Taylor, David’s concerns appear to be less about facing personal economic precarity than they are about the social insecurity and disorder that could result from an economic downturn or climate crisis.

To briefly review, all but one of the four participants who expressed clear economic grievances during my interviews elaborated that these concerns were less about fear of crime and economic competition, and more about how potential economic downturns could create conditions of social and environmental insecurity beyond government’s control (see Chapter 6). Overall, interviews expressing clear economic grievances or concerns represented a minority of my sample at 14 percent.

In this section I presented evidence from an evaluation of participant discourse for sentiments of personal economic precarity. I first described how my sample is comprised almost exclusively of economically stable, middle-income, white males. Individuals in my sample are broadly reflective of gun owner surveys, which find these demographics to, on average, hold at least a high school degree and some tertiary level education (Azrael et al. 2017; Saad 2020; Oraka et al. 2019). Qualitatively, most of my participants perceived themselves to be doing economically better or about the same as their peers, and the individual with true economic precarity in my sample was unable to join an armed group because of cost barriers to entry (Brian III%/KSM Recruit: 4831771). I further contributed largely unobserved evidence that access to firearms is partly dependent on enough income to own and operate these tools legally and safely.

Second, I reviewed participant evidence for perceptions of economic precarity in their networks, communities, and the US: do actors feel that their communities are declining economically, and that their economic future will be worse? The answer here is yes and no. My participants are pessimistic about the economic future of their communities and the US, but only one participant directly linked macroeconomic changes with reasons for joining an armed group.¹⁵² In short, while participants in my sample are sympathetic to the economic struggles of their communities, they tend to view their own positions as financially secure.

¹⁵² Here I am referring to David (KDLM: 1342898). The other participant, Drew (Watchmen: 2170513), was discussing gun purchases during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is related to firearm ownership patterns, but not necessarily mobilization into armed groups.

A few limitations are worth highlighting. First, this research interviews militia participants with leadership roles. Some hypotheses around right-wing mobilization (and political action more generally) posit that economic drivers are stronger among rank-and-file participants than among activists who remain ideologically committed over a period of years (cf. Dobratz 1997, 26; Mueller 2018, 13-14; Stern 1997, 119).

Second, the Covid-19 pandemic increased economic pessimism across the US population, a trend reflected in my own sample (Brenan 2021; Deane, Parker, and Gramlich 2021). Interviews collected under less exceptional economic conditions could potentially observe that armed group participants are consistently pessimistic about the future despite better economic indicators, or that participants reflect partisan divides obscured in this sample by widespread pessimism (cf. Deane, Parker, and Gramlich 2021). Alternatively, additional inquiry may find that group members tend to be somewhat unexceptional when it comes to their economic assessments, as documented in this research.

Overall, the descriptive conclusions observed in this section align with findings in comparative scholarship. A general consensus in comparative politics literature suggests that absolute experiences of deprivation are insufficient for political action free of other contextual factors (i.e., grievances are wider than the populations that mobilize). Comparatively, empirical evidence does not support a straight causal correlation between absolute economic disadvantage and support for populism or right-wing political attitudes (cf. Berman 2021; Bartels 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Salmela and Scheve 2017; Lamprianou and Ellinas 2017, 43-45).

Many studies of US armed groups focus on the white populations who are overrepresented in gun ownership, and thus armed group demographics. Observations here suggest that more ground-level research is necessary to better contextualize not only how the majority of gun wielders understand their privileged positionality as white gun owners, but also how a growing number of non-traditional gun owning demographics complicate causal stories built from samples of white, heteronormative firearms users.

In the next section I review participant accounts for evidence that actors are motivated by perceived material threats and competition from other social groups. As many scholars suggest in both political behavior and militia mobilization research, deprivation and status anxiety arguments require observing the interaction between economic precarity and salient social outgroups (cf. Freilich and Pridemore 2005, 542;

Berlet and Lyons 2000, 345-352; Gallaher 2002; Dobratz 1997; Warner et al. 2021; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Berman 2021).

II. Collective Grievance and Intergroup Competition

Even if actors do not feel individually deprived of opportunities, they can believe other groups in society receive unfair advantages. Comparative politics arguments that rely on group deprivation theory appear in scholarship that frames militias as ‘reactive’ social movements or opportunity hoarding: attempts to preserve existing privileges or ‘reclaim’ perceived losses in material political and/or socioeconomic status (cf. Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Cook and Kelly 1999, 248-249).¹⁵³ These economic anxiety accounts of militias emphasize how both the demographics and goals of its members (and kindred social movements) are ‘backwards-looking’ or protective of existing hierarchies, rather than ‘progressive’ in the sense of extending privileges to excluded groups.

In contrast to the generalized economic attitudes documented above, this section evaluates actors’ perceptions that other social groups ‘unfairly’ benefit from national gains. These sentiments are inextricably linked with participants’ perceptions of social resentment/outgroup animosity, the political beliefs they adopt, their levels of political distrust, and their positionality and life experiences. Prior comparative politics research, however, distinguishes perceived material grievances as sentiments partially distinct from those examined in the following chapters. With this caveat in mind, prior literature on US gun users and armed groups identifies four relevant social cleavages for group deprivation: geography, race, ethnicity/nationalism, and gender.

First, I examine participant accounts in relation to narratives of group deprivation tied to geography, and specifically rural/urban divides. My sample does not display strong discursive evidence of place-based resentment. I do observe that armed group

¹⁵³ Broadly, both militia and collective action research on ressentiment suggests potential loss of power and changes in social hierarchies can be a much stronger emotive mobilizer than actual disadvantage (cf. Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Piazza 2017, 56-57; McVeigh 2009; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 41; Williams 2003, 138). Ressentiment is defined by Nina Eliasoph (2017, 60) as: “In a world that lacks the social visions that sociology used to propagate, their resentful conversion of powerlessness into piety makes sense: if you have no vision, no hope of changing the social order, at least you can re-value your position in it, so you come out on top. It’s Nietzschean ressentiment—the hidden, jealous anger of the downtrodden who cannot win the game and have no hope of changing the game, so instead, convince themselves that they value lowliness over power. They convert their powerless rage into a holier-than-thou moralistic pride, inside of which is hidden a desire to annihilate the powerful, so that they can take the top position, become the powerful ones.” For ‘opportunity hoarding’ see Tilly (1999, 10) and Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013, 31).

members match identified rural and urban partisan divides measured in the wider US electorate. Second, I review data for evidence of worldviews and motivations referencing racial, ethnonationalist, and gender divides. While some participants shared concerns about their collective socioeconomic positioning as a white male, or perceived grievances with identified outgroups, these sentiments appeared in interviews alongside generalized disaffection with government elites and political processes. Among rightist participants, race appeared less frequently in discourse than gender and immigration in reference to material concerns. In leftist participant discourse, race appeared more frequently than gender, but these individuals identified with the grievances of outgroups, rather than adopting rightist narratives of white male ‘victimhood.’

The fact that race does not explicitly appear in participant discourse does not negate its causal relevance, as discussed in the last chapter. Rather, observations here support research agendas which account for the ways in which unconscious bias and privilege create outgroup bias that may be less ‘loud,’ and thus less measurable in structural accounts.

Geographic Grievances

A variant of relative deprivation theory argues that the worldviews, militancy, and voting behavior of rural, ‘left-behind’ economies root from rural ‘ressentiment’ (cf. Cramer 2016; Stock 2017; Hochschild 2016; Neiwert 1999). Much scholarship observes how gun ownership, the number of militia groups, and some political violence in the US correlates with rural geographies (cf. Stock 2017; Blocher and Miller 2018, 7-8; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 13, 112; Gallaher 2002, 223-224).

That political attitudes are correlated with geography is intuitive given that one’s residence is institutionally linked to government resource distribution and political representation. The US case alone displays varied explanations for why partisanship correlates with rural/urban divides, including resource competition, class divides, and exposure to social networks (cf. Cramer Walsh 2012, 519). Prior research also demonstrates how the costs of gun access are unequally distributed across the US in patterns that align with and reinforce geographic divides: rural areas disproportionately enjoy the benefits of ownership through more access to shooting land, while urban areas disproportionately experience the costs of gun violence.

My participants reflect well-documented correlations between partisan divides and geography: individuals in organizations identified as leftist all lived in urban areas (58% or 7/12) or urban clusters (42% or 5/12); this is compared to militia members, 46 percent (5/11) of whom lived in rural areas, 36 percent (4/11) in urban clusters, and 18 percent (2/11) in urban areas.¹⁵⁴ Residents of urban areas are overrepresented in my sample (n=28) in comparison to national gun owner surveys: 75 percent of participants lived in urban areas or urban clusters in comparison to just 48 percent of gun owners in a Gallup survey (Saad 2020), and 34 percent in the 2015 NFS (Azrael et al. 2017). This observation intuitively follows from the inclusion of leftist groups in my sample in relative proportion to militias.¹⁵⁵

Within my sample, those in objectively deprived regions tied to natural resource industries, or adjacent to these communities, were the participants most likely to touch on issues of rural or regional deprivation. Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) tells me that he watched his county in Kentucky “get the brunt . . . you know, [other] places . . . they got the Dollar General distribution center, and then a little further west, you know, [they’ve] got a bunch of factories . . . the further you get to central Kentucky, I mean, you’ve got jobs and stuff, so I mean, you can look for a better life. And lord, Lexington’s got every job you want, really.”¹⁵⁶ Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia member David (1342898) describes his community as “kind of an armpit [laughs]. I mean, it’s not a great place. It’s a mixed community as far as income level. There is a good—a large amount of low-income people. I would say the middle class that live in town are mostly older folks. It is a farm community.”

However, neither of these participants felt rural deprivation was a motive for action, the fault of urban counterparts, or even a political grievance. Later on in our conversation I ask Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) about the quality of regional healthcare. Matt tells me, “we had our little hospital—we called it a band-aid station,”

¹⁵⁴ I rely on existing definitions of urban and rural from the US Census Bureau, which defines ‘rural’ as areas with populations of fewer than 2,500, ‘urban clusters’ as areas with between 2,500 and 50,000 in population, and ‘urbanized areas’ as areas with populations of 50,000 or more (US Census Bureau 2021). I use April 2020 US Census Bureau population estimates from the Bureau’s QuickFacts at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts>. For areas under the 5,000 population threshold for QuickFacts, I use Deloitte and Data Wheel’s ‘Data USA’ estimates from <https://datausa.io/>.

¹⁵⁵ Individuals living in urban clusters formed 32 percent (9/28) of my sample compared to just 25 percent in Gallup (Saad 2020) and 19 percent in the 2015 NFS (Azrael et al. 2017). Twenty-five percent (7/28) of my sample lived in rural areas, compared to 48 percent (Saad 2020) and 33 percent (Azrael et al. 2017) in the same surveys.

¹⁵⁶ Do you think that your community is doing better or worse economically than other people in your state? What about the US?

but reasons, “it ain’t anything I would even consider to complain about because it’s just like your job: if you’re not getting it where you’re at, you can find it.”

Overall, I do not find evidence among my participants of worldviews or motivations overwhelmingly structured by rural resentment. Actors with exposure to rural poverty are sympathetic and observant of these conditions, but no one in my sample interpreted economic inequality as a specifically rural problem. Further, participants’ interviews substantively focused blame on political and economic elites at the national level, rather than urban counterparts (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Intergroup Competition

Intergroup competition tied to perceptions of unequal distribution of state resources is also argued to focus grievances against social outgroups. In contrast to the next chapter, which discusses how participants perceive outgroups as ‘threats’ to cultural life and status-quo norms and identities, this section explores outgroup resentment tied to material competition over power and government resources. In this limited conceptualization, I find group competition noticeably absent in participant accounts. As shown below, open outgroup bias exists among a minority of militia members, however, these participants focus more attention on social, rather than material, ‘threats’ from these outgroups (e.g., threats to US national culture).

In terms of racial and ethnic divides, militia members in my sample did not provide evidence of the heightened outgroup animosity documented in the majority of 1990s militia groups. Most participants referenced culturally salient dog-whistling language (e.g., ‘color-blind,’ nationalistic, and universalist rights rhetoric) recorded in national political discourse (cf. Berlet and Lyons 2001, 295-301; Gallaher 2002; Cooter 2013; Shapira 2013). There are some notable exceptions to this generalization discussed below and in Chapter 5, where I evaluate participants’ religious and conspiratorial beliefs. These interviews, however, contrast with most of my militia participants, who rhetorically sought to distance their groups from militias that protected Confederate statues and counter-protested the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (c. 2019-2021).

For instance, David (1342898) tells me that the Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia “certainly turn[s] people away because of their opinions on a lot of things: racial bias or sexual bias or religious bias; those things are not accepted. Because if you’re a citizen, you’re a citizen and you have a right to exercise your liberties the way you see

fit—*provided*, in doing so, you do not infringe upon someone else’s right to do the same thing.” When I ask what individuals get wrong about militias, David shares that, “in some of those organizations you have biases that are not fair—sexual bias, or gender bias, or religious bias, or racial bias—and those things are not—that is not constitutional. So, what happens is you get people that go out and protest, and they support one side or the other at the protest, and they call themselves a militia, and that word then gets tainted.”

In contrast, a different militia member describes the ‘diversity’ in their armed group in reference to BLM protesters. He tells me that when his group organized to protect Confederate statues in his city: “we just protected the courthouse and the statues during the BLM rally. We had a more racially and culturally diverse group, we did, than the BLM had. We had at least two Blacks, a Korean, a Puerto Rican, and when it comes to gender identity, I don’t know what we had on that. We are, generally, a very much diverse group.” He similarly claims that a misconception of militia groups is that they are racist, but notably does not make a distinction between his group and the openly white supremacist groups within the Militia Movement, as David (KDLM:1342898) does. In contrast to David and others in my militia sample, this individual sees no contradiction in rhetorically claiming to support diversity while organizing to protect symbols of the US Confederacy.

Ohio Defense Force (ODF) member Rob (1793091) mostly raises outgroup characterizations when discussing social welfare policies. Rob struggled to obtain welfare benefits as a single dad and attributes these challenges to a system ‘designed against white males.’ Rob explains, “the case workers are all women, and mostly black women. I’m a man, and a white man. I’ve been through all that and I need help with social services, and I’m told all the emergency services are for women. I even went to Women for Women. I said, ‘My kids are hungry. Help me.’ And they say, ‘Well, you’re a guy.’ I go to HUD housing and they say, ‘Well, first-off, you’re white.’ But I pay taxes, right?”

Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) similarly tells me that “America was doing fine until Obama got in there and it really started racism going. If we could have had someone like Ben Carson be the first black president, that would have been the most awesome thing. But you had to get a black man raised as a rich white man in there and then tell everybody how racist it was . . . And how about these white people that hate being white? I don’t understand it . . . Okay, well go where you are not the majority and see

how much you like it. They won't treat you well [laughs]. Go to Syria.”¹⁵⁷ While Josh points to racial divides at the elite level, the majority of our conversation instead focuses on his concerns around immigrants and other ‘non-American’ outgroups.

Josh and another militia participant independently raised immigration and foreign ‘others’ as a threat to both economic livelihood and social status positions during our interview. When I ask Ken (Light Foot Militia: 1806143) what he feels are the biggest problems facing the US and his community, he tells me: “China. Definitely China is a threat to America and my neighborhood. We have coal, and people selling coal or whatever to China only increases funding to the People’s Liberation Army. I follow a particular China blog, ‘China Uncensored,’ and they find how the Chinese are working on raising the Mongolian identity, because they were the first ones to be basically leaderized.” Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) responds to the same question with:

Border security and socialism, socialism, border security . . . a country with open borders cannot be a country—it’s a grand central station . . . And, if you want to come here—*legally*—I have no problem with it. When I say ‘you,’ I mean *them*, you know—*whoever* wants to come here. I don’t have any problem with you doing the legal thing. *And* that you have a skill to do while you’re over here, and not a skill of coming over here collecting welfare and sending it back across the border. You know? I’m not working for you . . . America is a great, great place, or was. And it still is. But it’s getting worse by the day. And it’s all because we are letting in people who have no moral value whatsoever and who no longer want to be free. In my own humble opinion.

The fears Josh and Ken share are framed mostly as social threats from political elites—such as socialism, communism, and nationalism—rather than as zero-sum resource contests with ‘outgroups.’ In contrast to Rob, both Josh and Ken are ultimately more concerned with the effects of ‘non-American’ migration on national ‘values’ than they are about immigrants’ job opportunities and ability to access social resources.

As illustrated in Rob’s account above, intersectionality is always present in beliefs around government resource distribution and legal rights (cf. Crenshaw 1989; Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing 2020). Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) similarly frames gender concerns as a form of economic grievance. He tells me, “well, now something’s ‘gotta be given there, you know? Either women have got to be getting paid the same amount of money or women are just plain fools. You know, yeah? . . . now here’s something I

¹⁵⁷ Question: Why do you think militias are important these days?

*do know about: police, fire, rescue, and military . . . if a female can do the same job I do, I prefer working with them myself. But, uh, if not, why should you get paid the same—or why should *I* get paid the same amount as *you* if I can't do the same job you can do?"*

The role of gender identity, similar to race and ethnicity, are important structural frames adopted by participants, but in evaluating interview evidence, it is clear that the reasons individuals perceived they joined armed groups in my sample have less to do with economic concerns about outgroups, and more to do with concerns about how their own social positioning relates to wider society and the direction of national politics. The ethnonationalist attitudes recounted here also notably overlap with mainstream Republican discourse. Survey and qualitative evidence suggests that political appeals since at least the Obama Presidency have shifted away from 'color-blind' rhetoric to more explicit ethnonationalist and racist appeals, such as those used by Donald Trump (cf. Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2017; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 137; Tesler 2018; *Economist* 2018).

In this section I analyzed participant discourse for evidence of worldviews and motivations tied to intergroup deprivation across geographic, racial, ethnic, and gender cleavages. First, I did not find evidence that armed members in this sample interpret their action through geographic grievances (cf. Stock 2017; Cramer 2016). Second, while a minority of militia participants expressed sentiments of material outgroup bias in interviews, these accounts focused more heavily on the 'socialist' political elites who manipulated these outgroups than on how these outgroups were perceived to be 'taking' resources. Evidence of elite political and social distrust in participant data is presented in detail throughout the following chapters, and especially in Chapters 5 and 6.

Conclusion

Overall, I do not find that my armed group participants are consciously motivated by or use economic precarity or intergroup grievance as an interpretative worldview or motive for action. Situationally, most of my participants are economically stable, middle-class, college-educated, white male gun owners. This demographic matches that of the statistically average gun owner and many past profiles of militia members. As guns are a resource limited by price and systemic barriers related to race, these

conclusions are not surprising. I contribute the observation that guns are relatively expensive tools to own and operate, which is why firearms are also viewed as financial investments.

While material grievances appeared in participant interviews, economic precarity was not a primary mobilizing frame for the actors in this research. This does not mean that class and material concerns are unimportant for explanations of US armed mobilization. Instead, I suggest that armed actors do not always interpret their own grievances and solutions in material terms, even while responding to changes brought about by national economic arrangements. Just as analysis of social class requires interpreting both objective positionalities and cultural understandings of ‘class,’ our interpretation of armed mobilization similarly requires unraveling how material concerns intertwine with personal experiences, political trust, and existing cultural and institutional patterns of social control.

This research demonstrates the need to further unravel the causal mechanisms linking actors to action when evaluating correlations between relative deprivation and armed political behavior. Observations in this chapter underscore what much comparative politics concludes: that sociopolitical beliefs and positionality mediate outcomes at the micro-level in ways that structural analyses cannot always predict. More attention to applying existing scholarship to qualitative investigations can only help to expand the field’s understanding of how actors respond to argued motivators at the ground-level.

In the next chapter I evaluate how actors define their own identities in relation to firearms use to understand how participants may be motivated by sentiments of ingroup bonding or outgroup animosity. Do participants relate insecurity felt in existing social boundaries to their own motivations for action? Do individuals find their membership rewarding because these groups offer arenas where actors can ‘perform’ armed identities that reaffirm a sense of ingroup bonding?

4. Social Resentment and Armed Mobilization

Introduction

In the previous chapter I evaluated participant interviews for evidence of worldviews and perceived motivations shaped by economic precarity and/or intergroup competition over negotiable interests. Much comparative politics scholarship, however, suggests political action is driven less by material conflicts, and more by ‘emotive’ intergroup competition over cultural and social boundaries.¹⁵⁸ Just as social threat is argued to manifest at the ballot box through right-wing populist support, defensive gun ownership and the Militia Movement are argued to be an expressive action for “reaffirming or reconstructing masculinity for white men” (Katz and Bailey 2000, 150). In this understanding, the pronounced emphasis on paramilitary rituals in militia groups does not serve a functional defensive purpose as much as a path to ingroup bonding. In the case of militias, ingroup bonding is argued to form around ‘remasculinating’ communities that ‘restore’ status loss in the labor market or public sphere by creating groups that exclude or target perceived outgroups (cf. Shapira 2013; Cooter 2013; Gibson 1994; Katz and Bailey 2000).

This chapter asks how arms training motivated by ingroup/outgroup divides might appear at the micro level in participants’ worldviews and stated motivations for membership. I review interview evidence and group discourse from members of armed groups with diverse political and constituency appeals. I first review how and if participants relate firearms to social resentment or perceived threats from ‘othered’ outgroups. On the right, participant and group rhetoric does not evidence particularly ‘heightened’ senses of explicit outgroup animosity, especially in comparison to right-wing gun owners and militias outside this research. Outside the right-wing groups in this research, leftist and community defense group participants unsurprisingly shared motivations for membership rooted in counteracting targeted violence and hate directed

¹⁵⁸ To briefly distinguish, e.g., the previous chapter would capture immigration as perceived ‘threats’ to economic security and positioning, while this chapter analyzes immigration as perceived ‘threats’ to social order: fears that newcomers will fail to respect normative ideas of citizenship and social interaction. While attitudes on class and socioeconomic security intertwine with social resentment, as discussed in the Introduction, political behavior explanations often distinguish economic grievances and social resentment as separate, albeit related, hypotheses. In any case, my goal is not to ascertain whether ‘identity trumps economy.’ Dualistic questions fail to leverage the strengths of qualitative accounts, which often show how such dichotomies are far from clear cut on the ground.

against their communities. Accounts provided from groups outside the well-analyzed militias demonstrate how outgroup animosity can create important pockets of countermobilization that may not always figure in national measurements that focus on the majority of gun owners.

Second, I examine participants' accounts of the social 'rewards' they feel they receive from armed group membership. I ask participants about their favorite parts of armed group membership, if they remember their first time shooting a gun, and what firearms practices and habits they adopt. While not a motivation for joining an armed group, individuals' memories of the first time they fired a gun can provide evidence of how actors relate firearms use to personal identity, as well as the emotions participants feel during arms use. Both of these questions informally probe for less obvious sentiments of ingroup bonding and community that may not be tied to the social cleavages identified in prior comparative politics literature.

Ingroup bonding mechanisms unsurprisingly appear important for group members' stated motivations. However, this chapter observes how participants describe community within arms groups in ways removed from clear ingroup/outgroup divides. Ingroup bonding, at least rhetorically, instead appears to revolve around shared conceptions of responsible ownership, rather than on previously identified social divides. Out of the 25 individuals who remembered the first time they shot a gun, all but one participant had fired a gun before the age of 20 (96%), and 68 percent had learned to shoot with family members.¹⁵⁹ These observations conform to prior surveys that document how prior firearms exposure (using a gun or being around individuals who use guns) mediates future behavior and attitudes around firearms use (cf. Hepburn et al. 2007, 16; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 11-13, 112; Primm, Regoli, and Hewitt 2009, 66; Follingstad et al. 2016; Gresham and Demuth 2020). It appears exposure to firearms at an early age does not distinguish armed group members in this research from the wider population of gun owners.

Although this is a small sample, observations in this chapter informally support prior empirical findings from studies on both gun owners and the Militia Movement. However, in contrast to some outside scholarship and popular portrayals of gun users that emphasize the symbolic messages conveyed through gun carrying, I instead find

¹⁵⁹ N=25. Four participants did not answer this question or did not remember their first time shooting. One of these four participants had fired a gun before the age of 20, but could not specify an exact age/range, and is therefore not included.

my participants described firearms in more mundane and less ‘emotive’ terms. These observations demonstrate how armed group members can purchase and train with guns for reasons quite separate from the symbolic meanings associated with firearms in popular culture. It is readily apparent that guns are cultural symbols, however, it is questionable whether all gun users consciously relate to such symbolism. In short, gun use is associated with white male positionality and right-wing attitudes, however, this observation does not fully explain why my participants felt motivated to join armed groups.

I. Arms Training and Social Resentment

This section reviews participant discourse for evidence of worldviews and motivations tied to outgroup animosity/social resentment, in particular across previously documented ethnic, racial, and gender divides. In comparative politics literature, ‘insecurity’ and ‘threat’ felt in daily interactions is argued to create pressures to secure boundaries around patriarchal or ethnonationalist behavioral norms. One potential outcome of these pressures is argued to be the formation of exclusive ingroups, such as militias.

I first review group and participant discourse for evidence of perceived social resentment and threat from racial and ethnic ‘outgroups.’ Among militia members I find social ‘threat’ narratives appear in a minority of participants’ discourse. Within leftist and community defense groups, participants consistently reference motivations for membership related to counteracting right-wing and white supremacist discourse and targeted violence. Sixty percent (3/5) of community defense group members, and 54 percent (7/13) of leftist participants referenced how their armed group challenged the idea of gun culture as right-wing, white, heteronormative, and cisgender male. However, changing gun culture through ‘inclusive’ groups of non-traditional owners was perceived by participants as a secondary goal to physically protecting targeted communities.

Second, I review discursive evidence around resentment tied to gender-based ingroup/outgroup divides. Reflecting the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender, two of the three militia participants who expressed worldviews related to ethnic and racial resentment also described resentment narratives around nonbinary gender identities and deviations from patriarchal norms. However, only a minority (27% or

3/11) of militia participant discourse revolved around explicit outgroup animosity toward gendered ‘others,’ and participants did not consciously link these sentiments with their own motivations for armed group membership. For the Pink Pistols and leftist groups who actively protect queer and nonbinary communities, reshaping gun culture through firearms groups was characterized as a smaller part of a wider strategy of pragmatic community defense.

Racial Resentment and Militias

On the militia right, 27 percent (3/11) of participants demonstrated clear rhetorical evidence of social resentment tied to race and ethnicity. Robert (ODF:1793091) tells me that, “if you’re a white person you have to bend over and suck everyone’s dick. Everyone has a right to be proud of identity—everyone else reminds me of *his* identity—I don’t wake up and think that I have a dick and I’m white. I think, I’m me and I got to go to work and get paid. It’s mud throwing by politicians and media. Most people agree on 80 percent of things.”

Rob calls one of his friends an “American with African heritage.” He shares that, “I’ve seen things, but I don’t go around like the KKK looking for a fight. The current racism we have is nothing like it was in the 70’s.” Later on, Rob (ODF:1793091) emphasizes again that social inequities and intergroup competition are orchestrated narratives of media and political ‘elites’: “a lot of people aren’t racist but are tired of ‘white male bashing.’ There’s a whole month of Black Pride, but I can’t be proud of me? Really? The media and the politicians are the biggest racists. There’s unity, but they say, stay in your own little tribe.”

Another militia member, Josh (WV Militia: 1768333), similarly tells me that claiming African American heritage is ‘unpatriotic’: “my only thing about black people are when they call themselves African Americans. Show me anywhere in your history, you came from Africa. I don’t call myself Irish-German American . . . The Irish were horribly mistreated. Where are my reparations? Do I get reparations for this? NO . . . Prejudices are okay for certain situations. But in peacetime and such there is no sense in any of that. No prejudice whatsoever in this outfit here.”

During our conversation, Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) blurs sentiments of social resentment with national and elite political divides similar to Rob. Josh (1768333) tells me, “the ones that you hear about are the socialists, and the squeaky wheel always gets

the grease . . . Right now, you are just hearing nothing but the socialists in this country. And I think that is really great. I think we should find out who they are. And, well if it were me, I would collect them and revoke their citizenship and send them all over to, ah, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—North Korea, even. Why not China? They want to be socialists, let's send them to a socialist country.”

When I ask militia member Hunter (TSM: 3354245) about the major issues facing his state, he also mixes social resentment with wider political grievances. Hunter tells me that that in Texas:

The biggest issue is the flood of illegal immigrants and ‘asylum seekers’ flooding our border. They are suspiciously not majority Mexican families as the media would have you believe . . . no one seems to care that these people coming across our border are not being Covid-tested, and the masses enter largely untracked. It only strains every system we have. Federal law is being intentionally ignored and the consequences for Texans are dire. What is the motive for allowing this?

In case these sentiments were simply a response to living close to the border, Hunter (TSM: 3354245) goes on to say that “the last thing that I see destroying our country is group identity politics. This ideology seeks to rank everyone based on their group identity and the intersections of the different groups they belong to. There is nothing more anathema to freedom than treating someone better or worse based on their racial, sexual, or gender identity.”

These accounts from a minority of militia members reflect what much prior research on gun owners and the Militia Movement document: the use of ostensibly ‘color-blind’ and universalist rights language that reinforces status quo hierarchies regardless of actors’ intentions. While expressing concerns about social outgroups, however, the narratives above also notably rest blame on political and media elites.

To understand whether my participants’ views reflect sentiments shared with other members of their community, I informally compared my sample with pilot interviews of gun owners, as well as observations throughout fieldwork (see Introduction and Appendix 2). While only an informal sample, conservative gun owners I spoke with who did not join armed groups displayed just as much, if not more, discursive evidence of perceived social threat from immigration, race, and gender inclusivity than the three individuals in my sample.

For instance, compare Hunter’s (TSM: 3354245) account from the border state of Texas with the response I received from Jason (Business Owner: 4754458), who lives

in the middle of the US. When I ask Jason (Business Owner: 4754458) to elaborate on why immigration is one of the biggest issues facing Kentucky, he tells me, “it affects us negatively in a *huge* way. I mean, I forget how many people are coming across the border as a rate—well, okay, it’s a huge amount; everybody knows that. So, it affects us in our healthcare; it affects us in employment; people driving illegally. And, you know, a very good friend of mine, her husband was killed by an illegal immigrant; he was deported five times and he was in the country for the sixth time.”

Further confirming that social resentment explanations may be less relevant for explaining the *conscious* motivations and worldviews in my own militia sample is the observation that groups outside this study rely on explicitly ethnonationalist and racist appeals. In contrast to the majority of militias in this sample that avoid openly discriminatory rhetoric on their own webpages, there are many examples of right-wing groups and militias outside this research who hold no such reservations. For instance, on the ‘Core Values’ and ‘Tenets’ page of the Proud Boys’ website, the group summarizes that “all that is required to become a Proud Boy is that a man declare he is ‘a Western chauvinist who refuses to apologize for creating the modern world’ . . . We truly believe that the West Is The Best and welcome those who believe in the same tenets as us’ (Proud Boys 2020). In other militias outside my sample, religious references similarly act as a screening mechanism against race and ethnicity. For example, the Alabama Outlaw Militia wrote in its Facebook page ‘About’ description that, “as far as religion goes to each his own but I can’t promise your safety if you pull out a rug and get on your knees and start mumbling shit about allah lol.”¹⁶⁰ As discussed in the next chapter, religious and Christian nationalist narratives are largely absent in my sample.

Overall, observations here reflect how a spectrum of armed right discourse exists on the ground. Ethnonationalist, misogynist, and racist appeals can be explicit, as in the case of the Proud Boys and the Alabama Outlaw Militia, or can more closely match what is currently considered ‘mainstream’ or ‘nationalist’ discourse around individual responsibility and ‘color-blind’ rights, as documented in my own sample. However, even if the ethnonationalist nature of militia discourse is ‘softened’ or ignored by those who enlist (cf. Berlet and Lyons 2001, 295-297; Barkun 1997, 287-290), all rightist armed action in the US relies to varying degrees on white positionality and privilege.

¹⁶⁰ Accessed May 23, 2018, see Appendix 3.

White positionality cannot be disentangled from the actions of militias, not least due to the visceral history of private violence in the US as a tool of white supremacy.

Combatting Racial Outgroup Animosity in Right-Wing Gun Culture

In contrast to the militia members in this sample, armed actors in my community defense and leftist groups viewed their actions as actively countering a right-wing and white dominated gun culture that openly targeted their own communities. Florida leftist defense group member Zach (FL Left: 3028541) tells me he thinks “it’s important for so called ‘gun culture’ to have leftist representation.” When I ask Jordan (MI SRA: 4572657) why groups like the Socialist Rifle Association (SRA) are important, they tell me because “they provide a grounding in firearms education, help out our community, and provide a counterpoint to toxic right-wing gun culture.”

Fellow chapter member Taylor (MI SRA: 4958846) similarly shares that they joined the SRA “looking for a community of like-minded individuals and a firearms group that wasn’t full of chuds, fascists, etc.” A ‘chud,’ as Georgia SRA member Steven (4907149) explains when describing his community, is “a person who supports Trump and is generally racist.” Steve (GA SRA: 4907149) similarly says that “the SRA is important: first, to let chuds/Trumpers know that not all lefties are shrinking violets and will not be intimidated; and two, to empower people to protect themselves and their community—but not just with firearms.”

The SRA actively constructs ‘safe spaces’ to protect against targeted violence by policing discriminatory beliefs among its members. As Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) explains, “the SRA’s goal is to provide a non-toxic alternative to the NRA . . . The NRA and other right-wing and centrist gun groups look at the world as being evil and try to establish an ‘us vs them’ paradigm. The SRA takes a big tent approach that is accepting of nearly all walks of life.” Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) tells me “that many ‘gun groups’ are there for self-serving reasons: its focus is not on community, but rather on protecting themselves, their family, and maybe friends and neighbors. Their worldview is focused on folks that are just like them: same color, socioeconomic class, and other characteristics.”¹⁶¹

SRA chapters and socialist armed groups seek to create new ‘cultures’ around gun use in efforts to combat the preponderance of arms among right-wing and violent hate

¹⁶¹ Question: Why do you think groups like the SRA are important?

groups. Through public range days, these groups also hope to draw in more diverse, new, or inexperienced gun users. Jeff (KY Left:2867389) tells me that while their group organizers are “a few folks of color, mostly white, mostly male,” their “range days are pretty diverse.” Many community defense groups such as the Pink Pistols adopt similar inclusive policies (see ‘Queer and Nonbinary Armed Defense’). This is in contrast to militia groups that more frequently run closed field exercises with vetted members. While three SRA members and a fourth leftist participant were part of underground tactical units with closed membership, these groups focused primarily on providing pragmatic community defense for protests and events such as Pride (see Chapter 6).

Among community defense group members, combatting the image of their communities as unarmed was even more important. As discussed in the Introduction, only two of my participants are femme-identifying. One of these participants is in a leadership role in a southern chapter of the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA). Nicole (NAAGA: 2979846) tells me that the biggest issues facing the US and her state are “racism and sexism in no particular order.” She decided to join NAAGA “because I wanted to see more diversity.” Nicole (2979846) says groups like NAAGA are important “because representation matters. We are legal gun owners.”

Most participants focused on how armed representation was meaningful, not because of their own feelings around ingroup belonging, but rather because it helped protect unarmed others. Empowering traditionally targeted communities is important for Michigan SRA member Taylor (4958846). When I ask who should own a gun, they respond, “everyone who wants to and is willing to learn how to use one safely and effectively, especially marginalized folks.” Alex (4770945) similarly tells me that most people do not understand that their chapter of the John Brown Gun Club (JBGC) is “not a bunch of cis white men; most of our membership is marginalized in one or more identities. We’re also not a militia and we’re not interested in training for offense.”

Fellow JBGC chapter member William (JBGC: 1390238) independently confirms that, “we’re disproportionately men or nonbinary people. Gun culture is typically extremely hostile to women and enbies [nonbinary individuals], and while we’re trying to change that, we’re one small group up against a massive industry and long-established white supremacist patriarchal culture.” Will (JBGC: 1390238) says groups like his are important because:

. . . gun ownership has become an almost exclusively right-wing thing in the US, which means the vast majority of people with guns support a racist and unequal status quo. It's important to show the white supremacist capitalists that they do not have a total monopoly on the means of violence. Even though the fascists and their conservative enablers would almost certainly win if there were some sort of armed conflict—which I think is extremely unlikely to ever happen, to be honest—my hope is that they would think twice if they know that that victory would come at a cost.

Later on in the interview William (JBGC: 1390238) shares that one of his favorite guns is “a pistol my nonno brought back from World War II as a trophy—with permission! The documents authorizing him to bring the pistol back are probably worth considerably more than the pistol itself . . . the near-useless CZ-27 . . . technically works, but it was stored improperly . . . it is a way to remember my nonno, and also it represents one dead Nazi. Maybe that’s morbid, but I am proud of him for fighting against fascism.”

The symbolism around guns most leftist and community defense group members emphasize, in short, is tied to the importance of armed deterrence to protect others. As Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) explains, “I’ve read about incidents . . . from Redneck Revolt in Charlottesville [2017 Unite the Right] . . . Those people aren’t making a point to carry a firearm, but it was *them* being there with firearms and being in a sound position and spacing so they looked competent [that] deescalated the situation . . . I mean, firearms very rarely deescalate situations, right? But if, like, folks are showing up to do violence on populations that they think are vulnerable and they realize that they’re not, that’s important.”

Representation and practical defense are intertwined organizational goals due to the fact that gun ownership remains disproportionately concentrated among white, right-wing males. As a result, as Chapter 6 discusses in detail, participants in non-militia groups placed heavier discursive emphasis on arms training as a way to deter physical violence against communities. The important conclusion from such exploratory probing is the need to consider how outgroup animosity not only motivates advantaged groups, but also the communities and social ‘others’ these groups target.

Gender Resentment and Militias

In comparative politics research, US right-wing political action is also argued to be a response to social resentment corresponding to established structural cleavages around

gender. Variations of this argument appear in gun-specific literature from outside the discipline, which equates firearms use with the performance of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (cf. Connell 2005; Stroud 2012; Taylor 2014). While militia members in this sample did not share motivations based in genderized resentment, a minority of interviewees clearly articulated worldviews aligned with gender and sexual bias (27% or 3/11).

Three militia members (all of whom are cisgender, heteronormative males with children) explicitly contrasted physical force with the weakness and ‘feminization’ of government services and society. Only Rob and Josh, the two militia members who evidenced explicit racial and ethnic resentment in the last section, consistently referenced gender concerns throughout our interview.

Both Josh (WV Militia) and Rob (ODF) organically raise examples of fathers forcefully disciplining sons during our discussions of the major issues facing the country. Rob (ODF:1793091) explains how many social problems today root from a lack of physical discipline: “. . . and all the stuff with condoms: we’ve handed them out forever and it doesn’t fix anything. Parents, just teach your kids to be men and your women to stand up for themselves . . . Allow dads to beat kids and make them make their sons take responsibility for pregnancy. My sons always say, ‘Dad, I’m glad you were an asshole because it kept us out of rehab and out of being homeless.’”

Rob (ODF:1793091) tells me that, “as a white man I don’t know what it’s like to be discriminated against, especially in the late ‘80s, but I believe in men’s rights. All these feminists [shrill mocking sounds]—shut the fuck up! I’m probably still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder from all that. I’m still regurgitating stories from my wife. She can accuse me of anything and I’m automatically guilty.”

Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) more explicitly connects his political concerns with both gender and race. When I ask about the biggest issues facing his state, Josh responds that “the male—especially the *white* American male—has nothing on his side. And he’s still being blamed for stuff he had nothing to do with.” Militia member Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) is a 59-year-old retired veteran and law enforcement agent who requires disability support. Josh tells me that some of the problems in the US today stem from how we expect boys to “be in there playing with Barbies and stuff instead of playing army or building forts, or learning how to fish and hunt and, you know, that’s what men do; that’s bred into us.”

Josh connects his concerns with border security and socialism discussed in previous sections with the “degradation of the family unit. All right? Once they started taking the

rights of the parents away from disciplining their children, that was all being part of the socialist program . . . the mother doesn't know what male children are or how they should be; they think that male children should be raised as a *female*—so they try to raise a male as a female—that's just not going to *work*. That's why you need a man in the house to teach a *male* child male things.”

Josh's assessments of 'masculinity' relate to his own positionality as someone who no longer hunts and is no longer expected to demonstrate youthful physical vigor. As Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) explains, “since I've gotten out of the service, I haven't been hunting since. And I just can't bring myself to kill anything . . . I can't bring myself to do it, to go out there and kill these animals . . . No. I refuse to. Some great white hunter I am.” In the same interview, Josh also illustrates the insecurity he feels around gender boundaries in daily interactions: “And now this transgender *crap*; that's the biggest bunch of *bullcrap* I've ever heard in my life. I don't know how many people you grew up with who didn't know whether they were a boy or girl, but even the guys who were effeminate knew they were boys. They might have liked boys, but I never knew of any boys that thought they were a girl.”

Similar to other forms of social resentment, including the material-based concerns discussed in Chapter 3, militia participants' beliefs and discourse tied to outgroup blame largely appeared in narratives that emphasized the harms of government 'overreach' (or socialist 'creep'), rather than immediate concerns about status competition with social 'others.' Overall, militia members did not provide clear rhetorical evidence that outgroup sentiments were a perceived motivation for their own arms training, especially in comparison to the more dramatic concerns shared about elite corruption and impending societal collapse chronicled in Chapters 5 and 6. Social 'outgroups' play dominant roles in these cynical militia narratives as well, but as later chapters illustrate, how actors assign blame for social changes is more complex than simple outgroup animus.

Once again, positionality and the multidimensionality of actors' motivations is shown to complicate causal stories that simplify relationships between structural indicators and micro-level motivations for action. Normalized, 'hegemonic' identities are likely to function subconsciously: that is, actors may not view their membership as affirming one's 'social identity' through exclusive communities of ingroup bonding. For instance, when I ask Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) about his favorite gun, his answer could demonstrate a nostalgia for childhood just as easily as a desire to role-play as a

‘cowboy’: “I have a Lever Action .357; a cowboy gun, like you would see on ‘The Rifleman.’ Do you know that show? It is almost identical to that. I really like that one. It is one of my favorites.”

This is in contrast to militia member Hunter (TSM: 3354245) and the account from JBGC member William (1390238) above, both of whom evidence clear ‘emotive’ attachments to some of their firearms. Similar to how William (1390238) valued a pistol for its connection to World War II and anti-fascist history, Hunter (TSM: 3354245) tells me that some of his favorite guns are ones that “stand as a singular representation of the struggles our country went through to achieve what we achieved. I love showing those weapons respect as an expression of my love for the ideals of America. I don’t get to do this often enough.”

However, aside from these three examples, highly personal attachments to firearms based on their symbolism are noticeably absent in participant discourse. As discussed in the last chapter and the second half of this chapter, my participants’ firearms purchasing and training habits more often reflected consumerist and leisure impulses. Even the emotive answers from Hunter (TSM: 3354245) and William (JBGC: 1390238) were offered only after sharing which guns they prefer to shoot regularly. As firearms trainer Daniel (Background Interview: 3864133) explains, “I just enjoy shooting . . . I like the long range shooting, like shooting one kilometre and more—one mile and more. It is really relaxing. It takes very long. You have to be—I don’t want to sound cocky—exceptionally good with math . . . to make a hit at a long range.”¹⁶²

In the second half of this chapter I discuss evidence from participant interviews and field observations around the social rewards individuals feel they receive from armed group membership. Rather than benefiting from communities that reinforce ingroup/outgroup narratives, accounts in this research suggest that participants are motivated to join groups in part to virtue signal and signpost their armed behavior as ‘responsible’ and ‘legitimate.’ Such rhetorical emphasis, regardless of its sincerity, is especially important on the militia right given heavy press coverage. As a result, many members attempt to reinforce the ‘virtue’ of their actions to dispel the negative connotations that their arms training often inspires in public commentary.

¹⁶² E.g., long distance shooting requires calculating “windspeed, gravity, and the bullet rate—how fast the bullet flies—and so on” (Daniel: 3864133).

As with race and ethnicity, however, whether or not militia participants are aware of the unconscious biases from which they benefit, these structural forces remain ever-present. In the next section I balance analysis of heteronormative social resentment with accounts from the armed actors who actively work to combat targeted violence and hate against non-binary and queer communities on the ground.

Queer and Nonbinary Armed Defense

The mission of the Pink Pistols is not only to provide protection for queer and transgender communities, but also to “change the public perception of the sexual minorities, such that those who have in the past perceived them as safe targets for violence and hateful acts . . . will realize that a segment of the sexual minority population is now armed and effective with those arms” (Pink Pistols n.d.).

Georgia Pink Pistols member Justin (4659213) tells me that the national organization “is effectively a gun rights and gun community group that focuses on involving the queer community in self-defense and gun politics and the gun community . . . acknowledging that queer individuals and especially transgender people have a disproportionate likelihood of being targeted by violence . . . we focus very strongly on self-defense both with and without a firearm, and educating people on what it takes to buy a gun and conceal carry.”

The June 12, 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida was a triggering event for nonbinary and queer armed defense mobilization, much as the 2017 Unite the Right rally was for leftist armed groups (see Chapter 6).¹⁶³ Justin (GA PP: 4659213) tells me that the Orlando chapter of the Pink Pistols “grew enormously” after the Pulse shooting. When I ask Nick (MA PP: 2910720) why he wanted to join the Pink Pistols, he replies, “I joined shortly after the Pulse nightclub massacre. While having patrons with guns inside the nightclub wouldn’t have been a good idea, the event in general, followed closely by Trump’s election, led to a feeling that my being gay left me at risk.”

While Nick (MA PP: 2910720) initially joined the Pink Pistols to defend against targeted violence, he tells me that his group is also important for representation in the firearms community:

¹⁶³ The Pulse Orlando nightclub massacre remains one of the deadliest mass shootings in US history, killing 49 and injuring 53 others. While shooter motivations remain unclear, Pulse was one of Orlando’s “best-known gay clubs” (cf. Zambelich and Hurt 2016).

The public perception of gun owners is of hardline conservatives. It doesn't seem like a group that would be welcoming to LGBTQ+ folks. When I first went for training, prior to being aware of the Pink Pistols, I was careful to hide my orientation. In actuality, I've found the [wider gun] community to be very welcoming of us, with the possible bias that I'm in the relatively liberal state of Massachusetts. But the Pink Pistols represent a place that is explicitly welcoming . . . I think our public existence is helpful just in letting people know that politics aren't one-size-fits-all. You can be gay and own a gun.

Rather than viewing his own gun use as empowering, however, when I ask Nick (MA PP: 2910720) about his favorite parts of membership he shares how he "had the privilege of meeting an elderly transwoman who had a lot to teach me about shooting revolvers like a pro. I hope that she never needs a gun to defend herself, but I'm also very confident that if she does, she is going to be victorious. It challenges a lot of stereotypes." Nick (MA PP: 2910720) tells me how his group maintains an open-door policy that recruits and educates members of their community, while supporting more particularized community defense goals:

. . . we believe in being able to defend ourselves and helping to train others, but our meetups are largely social outings and fun range trips. We're ordinary gay (etc.) folks who happen to be gun owners, and ordinary gun owners who happen to be queer. Our backgrounds are pretty diverse, politically, economically, and so forth. And we love it when new folks drop by! We've had many people come to our events who have never shot a gun in their life, and it's rewarding to help them learn the ropes. Some have gone on to get licensed, buy their first gun, and become regular attendees. Others have decided it wasn't for them, and that's great too. The Pink Pistols are somewhat unique in that there is no formal membership: anyone is welcome to show up. We have some very experienced instructors eager to help.

Louisiana Pink Pistols member Michael (1140182) similarly says that groups like his are important because "I think that the right to self-defense is a right for everyone, *especially* minority groups who are more often the targets of violent attacks. The gun culture is unfairly portrayed as something only for old white men, but there is actually a great deal of diversity. I think that the more groups that exist to break that stereotype, and to take gun rights out of the false left-right political dichotomy, the better." Mike (Louisiana PP: 1140182) readily admits he does not "want to be the person who actively *leads* the group as much as I want to be the instructor, as I am not personally in the

LGBTQ community, but an ‘ally.’ We have LGBTQ members of the chapter, so I defer to them in matters of the direction of the group.”

Allyship and a sense of satisfaction from arming nonbinary individuals also exists within some socialist and leftist armed groups. Evidence of allyship was especially apparent in my informal surveys of group ‘meme’ culture (cf. Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Socialist armed group member Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) tells me one of his favorite parts of membership is changing gun culture on the ground. Jeff smiles as he shares how he “helped a transwoman buy a Glock .19. And, like, it’s just interesting being in that space because there is this gun shop dude who doesn’t even realize that he is using her preferred pronouns [laughs]. You know? [laughs] And he probably doesn’t even realize he is talking to a transwoman. You know what I mean? And, like, you’ve just armed one.” Pennsylvania SRA member Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) similarly explains that their chapter provides “a safe space for our Black and Brown comrades, our gay and trans comrades, our immigrant comrades, and anyone else who is shunned by far-right gun culture.”



FIGURE 4.1. “Respect Pronouns Not Cops”
Screenshot of an October 11, 2021
Instagram post by a Wisconsin chapter of
the SRA.

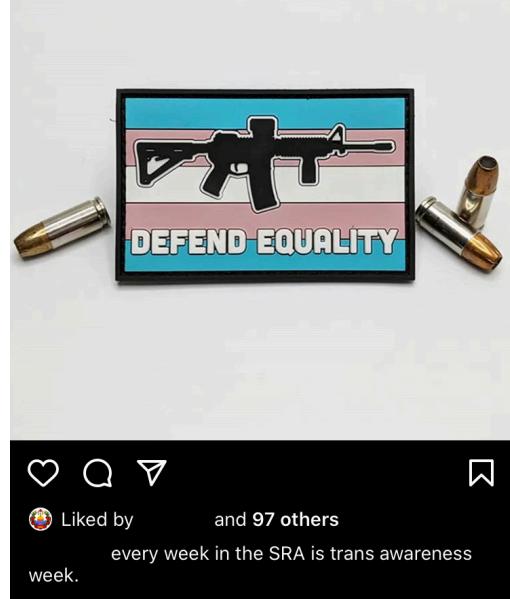


FIGURE 4.2. SRA Instagram post for
Transgender Awareness Week 2020
Screenshot of a November 17, 2020 Instagram
post by a Pennsylvania chapter of the SRA.

However, as the Pink Pistols emphasize, arms training and armed defense in the queer community is not necessarily about openly carrying guns to break public stereotypes (cf. Figure 4.3). The reasoning behind the formation of the Pink Pistols, as summarized in their utility manual, is to “teach queers to shoot, then teach the world that we have done it. This serves two key purposes, first, to prepare members of the sexual minority community with the skills and knowledge necessary to take individual responsibility for their own protection, and to spread the word of this fact . . . In short, it is meant as a deterrent. When weapons are concealed, one cannot tell who is or is not armed” (Patton 2013).



FIGURE 4.3. National Pink Pistols logo

Reprinted from *The Pink Pistols Utility Manual* (Patton 2013).

Together, participant accounts here suggest that leftist and community defense groups may very much be motivated to action as a result of existing outgroup bias and targeted violence. Overall, however, the identified relationship between gun wielding and ingroup bonding around existing social cleavages does not appear to fully explain conscious motivations and worldviews at the actor level *in my sample*. In the next section I discuss participant accounts that focus on more functional and mundane motivations for gun use and armed group membership.

II. Socialization Around Firearms

In addition to social mechanisms tied to ingroup/outgroup divides, prior research also suggests political action can offer social rewards that may be tangential or unrelated to previously identified structural tensions (cf. Fritsche, Jones, and Kessler 2011, 106-107; Shapira 2013; Jasper 2011). To understand if gun use in armed groups might offer less obvious or measurable rewards tied to social belonging, I asked participants a series of questions around firearms use, such as the first time they fired guns, if they hold weapons permits, how often they visit ranges or go hunting, and what guns mean to them.

I first review participant accounts of their first time firing a gun. Of the 25 individuals who responded, all but one participant had fired a gun before the age of 20, and most were introduced to shooting through family. Notably, early exposure to firearms use in my sample aligns with established data on the national population of gun owners. This apparent relationship, which cannot be properly investigated in this research, may be an important insight for future work on armed action in political science.

Second, I review interview questions around current firearms use. All participants emphasized how they are respectful of safety protocols, and all individuals prided themselves on being safe (or ‘good’) gun owners. Participant accounts suggest that discourse around responsible and safe gun use signals and signposts their own armed action as both a service-oriented and ‘legitimate’ exercise of violence.

Finally, I review participant accounts for stated ingroup bonding rewards that might not appear in prior analysis. Evidence here suggests that functional knowledge of firearms offers a more mundane form of bonding around mechanics and gadgetry, not unlike other fields requiring technical expertise (e.g., music, mechanics, engineering, etc.). Observations here support accounts documented in the previous chapter, which demonstrated how participants’ interests in guns extends beyond self-defense to viewing firearms as leisure goods, financial investments, and novelty items. Conclusions in this chapter may problematize some scholarship outside the discipline, as well as many cultural narratives, that frame guns as ‘mythical,’ taboo objects that impel violence (cf. Springwood 2014, 457-459).

Participants' First Time Firing Guns

During my interviews I asked participants whether they remembered how old they were when they first shot a gun, or if they have any memories of the first time they fired weapons. Ninety-six percent of respondents were introduced to firearms in childhood or adolescence, mostly through family (68%) or Boy Scouts (12%) (n=25, see Figure 4.4). The average age of first gun use in my sample is around 12, which matches the estimated national average age for males who were raised in gun-holding households (Parker et al. 2017, 5).

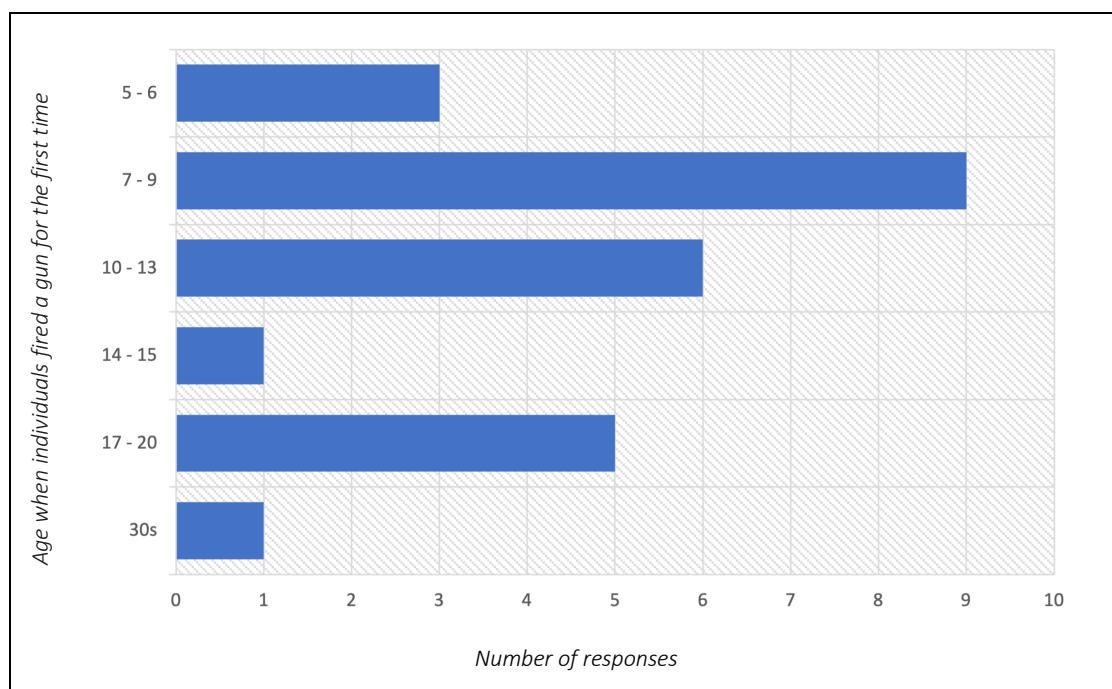


FIGURE 4.4. Participants' reported age of first firing a gun (n=25)

Among militia participants, Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) tells me, “absolutely! I remember it like it was yesterday . . . My father took me out shooting first, and I was like six-years-old, and then, when I got into Cub Scouts is when I got my first .22 . . . I was able to keep it in my room and clean it, and not load it or anything . . . I first shot a gun at six-years-old and had and maintained my gun when I was eight-years-old.” Ken (PA LFM: 1806143) says he was seven when “my dad took me and my little brother out with a .22 and we did what we called in the Navy ‘motorization fire’: just getting used to firing.” Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) was also “seven years old, and my dad let me

shoot a .22 rifle at my uncle’s house. It was fun and soon I was able to hit a soda can. It was fun when I made it ‘jump.’”

Accounts among the leftist end of my sample are not that different. A member of a Pennsylvania SRA chapter, Tyler (2911613), tells me that “my father took me shooting for the first time when I was around 11-years-old. He was never a big gun guy, but he owned a few pistols.” Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) was introduced to shooting through his family and youth activities. Jeff tells me he “was in Boy Scouts, who shot firearms. Then I would shoot with my dad as I got older. So, I kind of grew up around guns and had, like, a decent understanding of gun safety. And then . . . when I moved back [home], my dad and I would just shoot for fun when we would hang out.”

Both Jeff and Alex have a parent who worked as a police officer. Alex (JBGC: 4770945) tells me, “my mom was a cop and my dad was a veteran. I started shooting when I was 7, but didn’t get into shooting till I was about 16.” Alex’s favorite guns are “a Sig [Sauer] P229 9mm handgun” and one of their “AR-15s, a gift from my now deceased dad that I have a sentimental attachment to.”

Very few individuals in my sample came to armed groups seeking first-time exposure to guns, and the overwhelming majority of my participants recounted how they joined groups primarily to share, rather than gain, knowledge. One exception to this is Zach (FL Left: 3028541), who tells me that he “first shot a gun when I was 13 or so, but it was only once, at a range, and never again until I was 30.” Zach says that his favorite part of membership is “having a community of folks who I know will not judge my lack of knowledge, who will embrace what knowledge I can share, and who all desire to improve themselves and their community.” For Zach, his group is a “safe space to learn, ask questions, and make friends with folks who share most of my values.” Jamie (JBGC: 2874603) is the one participant who “was never in contact with guns until late in my 30s.” They tell me they were introduced to firearms “when one of my partners took me shooting,” and that they joined the JBGC sometime after this experience (around 2017).

Twenty percent (5/25) of participants were introduced to firearms through sport, police, or military programs. This is in addition to the three individuals (12%) who learned to shoot through Boy or Cub Scouts. David (KDLM: 1342898) was on his high school shooting team. He tells me, “it was just like going to football or going to soccer or being on the wrestling team. I mean, we had school staff that was the instructor—he was the NRA-qualified instructor and he had certifications—and we got marksmanship

certifications through the NRA at our school . . . It was an elected afterschool activity like football or baseball or basketball.”

Another one of my participants who was born in Britain shares how he was an “Army Cadet in my last three years at school. It was not regular army—it was what was called back then the CCF (Combined Cadet Force), which over here would be called [Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)] . . . I was in the Corps of Drums [makes drumming sounds] . . . and I shot for the shooting team . . . So, in a broad sense, I've been exposed to things that go pop or bang most of my—at least my adult life.”

The adolescent and childhood experiences with guns documented here match well-established trends in the national population of gun owners. Even childhood exposure to shooting through organizations such as the Boy Scouts is a well-observed pattern throughout US history (cf. Mechling 2014). However, is there evidence that my armed group members understand their firearms exercises differently as adults?

Participants' Firearms Practices and Experiences

Knowing how to use a gun and practice proper gun safety was unsurprisingly a point of pride and purpose for members of groups formed around firearms education. For instance, both the Watchmen and the Orange County SRA emailed firearms safety guides in addition to completing interviews, and groups such as the SRA offer gun safety resources on their websites. All participant interviews included discussions of gun safety, and many accounts distinguished ‘proper’ gun users from ‘irresponsible’ ones. In addition to discussing responsible gun use, participants also shared how firearms training requires skill and a degree of physicality that offers rewards removed from any kind of ingroup bonding.

I start by reviewing participants' rhetorical signaling around responsible use. Militia member David (KDLM: 1342898) tells me, “I advocate in my guys, we carry our weapons Condition Three . . . In other words: I do not have a round in the chamber. That is a safety thing that I believe everybody should carry that way. That is the way the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) carries.”¹⁶⁴ When I ask Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) what his favorite parts of membership are, one of the answers he provides is, “the gun safety

¹⁶⁴ ‘Conditions of readiness’ are firearm positions that vary by gun, but broadly range from zero to three or four, with the highest end of the scale being the ‘safest’ (unloaded, i.e., no bullet in the chamber, disengaged magazine, hammer down), and zero indicating a loaded firearm that is cocked with the safety off (i.e., ready to fire) (cf. Halek 2015; Wilson 2015).

stuff, especially if you are using any kind of, like, semi-automatic: you always assume that there is one in the chamber, always be aware of where your muzzle is, you know, those basic things.”

When I ask Arizona SRA chapter member, Shawn (2986463), if it is important to own guns, he replies yes, but elaborates that, “first and foremost, firearms ownership needs to be accompanied by knowledge on how to safely and effectively operate firearms. This also means ample practice.” Similarly emphasizing safety, one of the anonymized leftist defense groups in this research posted a picture of a January 2022 range day on its Instagram page with the caption: “range day essentials: IFAK [Individual First Aid Kit] and the knowledge of how to use one. Training with guns has inherent dangers! Mitigate those dangers as much as possible with medical training and supplies.”¹⁶⁵

While gun safety was rhetorically important, most participants also shared how they enjoy shooting and operating guns. As someone who had never fired more than a BB gun before this research, I found my handgun classes and shooting experiences initially intimidating, and then entertaining. Practicing at a range encouraged a sportsmanlike mentality that made me want to return and improve my shooting skills. The lethality of firearms and the importance of safety was in part what made them so thrilling to use and master, both for myself and other armed group members.

For instance, Massachusetts Pink Pistols member Nick (2910720) tells me that he makes “an effort to visit the range at least once a month or so . . . I think that if I have guns in the house I have an obligation to make sure I remain proficient in their use. And I would be lying if I said visiting the range wasn’t fun.” One of Nick’s favorite guns is “a 12-gauge shotgun—ideal for home defense, and candidly, a whole lot of fun at the range.”

When I ask Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) if he thinks it is important to own guns, he replies, “now some people’s got a different way of life, you know? A gun to them is only protection. A gun to me is partially life. Like, you go hunting, you get bored, you go shoot, you know? It ain’t only for protecting yourself—I mean, it’s for enjoyment as well, as long as the people are responsible enough.” SRA member Jacob (WI SRA: 3309261) similarly discusses travelling with guns as a way to ‘kill’ time: “I

¹⁶⁵ Posted January 2022, see Appendix 3 for redacted screenshot.

was going to be out away from home for a month, so I wanted to bring some toys so I could go to a shooting range at some point, since I had nothing else to do.”

The pleasure of shooting was apparent when I asked participants if they had a favorite gun. While a few individuals paused at the idea of picking a favorite ‘tool’—most interviewees had no issue. Favorite guns were sometimes antiques or items kept for sentimental reasons, but more often were favored for how the gun felt when shooting it. Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) answers, “while we shouldn’t be fetishizing firearms, I do have some that I enjoy shooting more than others. My favorite is perhaps my semi-automatic shotgun.”

Louisiana Pink Pistols member, Michael (1140182), similarly shares that certain guns “are my favorite because I find them the most fun to shoot. Double action revolvers can be fired in two modes: double-action and single-action. A .357 can also fire .38 Special, which is about half as powerful, so it makes for more fun, light-recoiling target practice; whereas the .357 is excellent for defense, or even hunting.” Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) has “a short-barreled AR-15 that I particularly like. It’s just a really enjoyable gun to shoot and it handles very well; I’ve put a decent amount of upgrades into it.”

For several participants, subject interest in mechanics and engineering made guns a fascinating object beyond their functional and leisure uses. Two participants tell me they own what is known as a ‘ghost gun’—or firearms assembled by the user that do not have serial numbers.¹⁶⁶ As one participant explains: “you have to finish it yourself. So, you can’t finish it for anybody else . . . You get what is affectionately referred to as a ‘paper weight’ in the firearms community—because that’s all it really is until you finish it.” Rather than wanting the gun for a nefarious purpose, learning the mechanics of constructing a firearm was particularly appealing for these participants. As a different ‘ghost gun’ owner explains: “I have guns without serial numbers, for example, because it’s legal to manufacture your own guns and I find that to be an interesting hobby. So, I have a couple that are unserialized, legally, and as long as I never transfer them that’s cool.”

Similarly, some of militia member Hunter’s (TSM: 3354245) favorite guns “are old rusty firearms that I have rehabilitated. The value I place in firearms is more of a measure of how much work I put into it, akin to a hobby, than its utilitarian aspects.”

¹⁶⁶ I leave participants anonymous here for obvious reasons. Neither of these individuals was in a militia.

Pink Pistols member Nick (MA PP: 2910720) also shares a very technical elaboration of his favorite gun:

My 1911, or specifically, a Smith & Wesson 1911SC, E-Series. It is a beautifully made gun—almost a piece of art. The 1911 name comes from the year it was adopted by the US Army as a sidearm, and the design has scarcely changed since then. John Browning's design was so good that it's still being used 110 years later. Although the mechanics are essentially unchanged, Smith & Wesson put a lot of small refinements on this gun. The 'SC' in '1911SC' is S&W's designation that the frame is made of a scandium-aluminum alloy, keeping the gun lightweight for its size without compromising strength. It sports a two-tone finish with a satin nickel slide on a black frame, complemented by elegant wood grips. Guns tend to be utilitarian in design with this one being a welcome exception.

One SRA member shared a picture of their favorite gun, an AR-15 that is “a great gun (reliable, accurate, highly ergonomic), and I've customized it to be exactly how I want it” (see Figure 4.5).



FIGURE 4.5. Image of firearm with inscription: 'This Machine Makes Folk Music'

Photograph courtesy interview with SRA member. Text on gun reads: 'This machine makes folk music.' This inscription presumably references folk musician Woody Guthrie's guitar, which bore the inscription: 'This Machine Kills Fascists.'

Far from a sentiment emerging from a uniquely 'American' culture of gun commodification, two of my participants are foreign nationals who tell me they moved to the US partly for its laxer gun laws (only one is in an armed defense group). My armed defense group member tells me:

I lost a huge collection of handguns in 1997 . . . [after Hungerford, Home Secretary] Douglas Hurd, primarily, made a change in the laws saying semi-automatic rifles were going to be outlawed. So, I lost my [Ruger] Mini-14 and Sterling Carbine because of that. Then the handgun aspect was okay for quite a long time until Thomas Hamilton . . . Dunblane, he shot up a load of kids. That was a diabolical situation and that was, I suppose, in a sense, the excuse that was wanted to clamp down on all these ‘nasty’ people who had handguns . . . I think it was in 1997, these all had to be handed in. Wasn’t much choice because if guns are registered they know who you are and what you’ve got, right? So, those all went. And all I had left in the end, which I managed to bring with me, was two shotguns and a couple of rifles.

Overall, observations here suggest that firing guns and practicing responsible ownership offer my armed group participants rewards unrelated to ingroup/outgroup divides. Mastery of firearms was a personally fulfilling skill to learn, as well as a matter of public safety and self-defense. In short, analysis of participant accounts here suggests firearms proficiency and a technical understanding of guns may function as a social ‘glue,’ and that firearms use can be about much more than symbolic shows of ‘masculinity’ or ethnonationalist pride.

Firearms Training as Social Bonding

My participants also shared motivations for action tied to forming community around perceptions of responsible gun use and community service. Much like recreational sports leagues, actors in this research describe how arms training groups can be opportunities to meet like-minded people and form support networks around a shared hobby.

When I ask Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) why he wanted to join his SRA chapter, he tells me, “to pursue a hobby I enjoy without having to deal with mainstream right-wing gun culture. We do a lot of mutual aid work, safety training, education, and we have a book club. It’s a cool community to be in beyond just the firearms aspect.” William (JBGC: 1390238) says that he joined the JBGC because he “wanted to be around like-minded people who didn’t have a dogmatic view of guns as evil and who wanted to help their community. I also wanted to be able to pursue shooting as a hobby with people who weren’t right-wing reactionaries.” As SRA member Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) similarly summarizes, “I wanted to be around like-minded folks and wanted to help support the community.”

When I ask Alex (JBGC: 4770945) what their favorite part of membership is, Alex says they “love the feeling of camaraderie and solidarity. My group in particular is very open and warm.” Alex describes fellow members affectionately, saying that they are “all the same in our regard for community defense, but we vary *a lot* when it comes to aesthetics, political beliefs (but we’re all far left), interests and hobbies, and backgrounds. We do all love each other though.” Members of Alex’s chapter of the JBGC meet outside group events. As Alex (JBGC: 4770945) describes, “we hang out just as friends pretty often. We have a few group chats with other organizations where we kind of just shoot the shit and have fun together.”

SRA member Taylor (MI SRA: 4958846) also says community is their favorite part of membership: “Even more than a gun organization, we’re a community. I’ve met several of my closest friends as well as my partner through the organization. I greatly enjoy spending time with all of the members, and know that if I ever need help, they have been, and will be there for me.” Fellow chapter member Jordan (MI SRA: 4572657) also answers that their favorite part is “the people I’ve met and the sense of belonging I’ve found.”

On the right, Robert (ODF:1793091) shares that at militia meetings, “we have regular conversations . . . when we’re all sweaty and muddy, we talk about jobs, that neighbor that got robbed . . . gossip and regular life. We have debriefs and focus on the FTX [Field Training Exercise], so in between politics might come up, but we’re having normal conversations . . . between trainings and assessments of activities.”

Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) similarly answers that groups like his are important because of “mutual assistance. Humans are a pack animal. We are social creatures. It is important to do things with people who have similar interests. This is true of martial arts, reading clubs, sports leagues, neighborhood watch, churches, wine clubs, ham (amateur) radio clubs, fencing clubs, and all sorts of other associations.” Emphasizing the importance of social relationships among group members, Joseph tells me that he “left a previous group for the same reason many people in many types of organizations leave: unnecessary drama.” Militia member Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) also finds that his favorite part of membership is “the people. You’re actually learning the people, the families, the backgrounds these people come from. I mean, recognizing every individual soul.”

Significantly, however, ingroup bonding also appears to exist in my sample through shared personal or professional experiences with violence and firearms, including prior

military service (cf. Shapira 2013, 36). Josh (WV Militia: 1768333), for instance, views militias as a social space for military culture: “so when people are talking about a well-regulated militia, it’s usually those who have been in the military who can create a military-type atmosphere with rules, regulations, and discipline; not a bunch of guys getting together with their rifles.” David (KDLM: 1342898) similarly sees shared norms and values from past military service as important for his arms training. When I ask him about his favorite parts of membership, David replies, “well, as a military veteran, I can say this—and it’s very different for people who are not military veterans—but having the ability to have the camaraderie that I miss from when I was in the military is probably my favorite part of being in the militia. Having that brotherhood, and having the closeness between the guys, is probably the thing that drives my motivation the most.”

Arms training groups also appear to offer safe spaces to confront very real dangers around firearms and mental health.¹⁶⁷ Three participants shared how they helped friends or fellow group members with mental health crises. When I ask Ken (Light Foot Militia: 1806143) why militias are important, he says that, “it is a great way for veterans to talk to other veterans about their issues without fear of judgement. So if they are having a tough time, then you have somebody that is basically in your network that you can talk to without . . . the VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] coming down and kicking down your doors and taking your guns because you are just going through a rough patch.”

When I ask Wisconsin SRA member Jacob (3309261) who should own a gun, he also shares the importance of social relationships to avoid government intrusion in matters of mental health: “unfortunately, it is the police’s job a lot of the time to determine if you are in sound mental health or not . . . and since a lot of people don’t talk to their neighbors, the government kind of has to come in . . . I kept [a] shotgun for [someone for] like a year . . . But that required me to know that dude and understand what was going on. Unfortunately, people don’t have those kinds of relationships a lot of the time, so we fill that gap with government. It would be nice if we didn’t have to.”

Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) similarly tells me that he has some “friends that have gotten into some pretty sticky situations . . . if you’re feeling like hurting yourself or harming yourself or you’re not doing well, you need to get rid of your firearms. And

¹⁶⁷ As briefly referenced in the Introduction, suicides have consistently compromised the highest number of gun fatalities in the US since at least the 1980s (cf. Azrael et al. 2017, 38; DeConde 2001, 244). The CDC estimated that 60 percent of the 243,039 gun fatalities in 2017 were suicides, with homicides comprising 36.6 percent (Kochanek et al. 2019, 12-13).

you can—I can be that person. You can call me, no questions asked. And you can get them back when you want them . . . it's just super important to make that anchor the conversation.”¹⁶⁸

While functioning in ways similar to social groups without lethal arms, some of the evidence above regarding the need for community support around firearms and mental health points to the observation that arms training fulfills somewhat different needs than unarmed social organizations. I return to participant accounts of the intrinsic rewards they receive from membership in Chapter 6, where many of the service-oriented sentiments expressed in this chapter are shown to arise from the recognition that private armed defense is a necessary good, not only for group members, but also for the communities they serve. Such sentiments clearly overlap with and rely on ingroup bonding, but how members perceive their armed group community is only one part of why my participants state they were motivated to join. Social divides unquestionably structure the contours of armed group membership, but as Chapter 6 illustrates, my participants also feel motivated and rewarded by a sense of service, at least as much as by the prospect of socializing with like-minded individuals.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed participants’ perceptions of social threats, armed others, and their own firearms use. In contrast to earlier studies of the Militia Movement and wider populations of gun owners, my armed group members do not discuss motivations for action tied to intergroup social threat. I first reviewed participant and group accounts for evidence of social resentment along ethnic, racial, and gender divides. While social resentment discourse appeared among a minority of militia participants, these accounts did not appear to substantively diverge from national Republican Party rhetoric and other gun owners. Participants also did not perceive their own actions through discursive worldviews based in social resentment. As with the material grievance research explored in the last chapter, observations here primarily urge caution at oversimplifying the mechanisms leading to armed action at the actor level. This research will continue to demonstrate the necessity of considering actors’ own intersectional positionalities and multidimensional reasons for action in future investigations of armed mobilization.

¹⁶⁸ Question: What is your favorite part of membership?

Additionally, much political research on US armed groups usefully concentrates on identifying structural predictors for the majority of armed group mobilization: militias and right-wing actors. However, this chapter documents how outgroup animosity and social resentment can also motivate countermobilization against white supremacist and violent groups. The inclusion of leftist and community defense groups in this research offers important lessons for future political science research, which will need to account for newer demographics of armed actors.

Second, I observe how participants and armed groups rhetorically ‘signal’ responsible ownership, and spend significant time discussing highly technical interests in mechanics, firearms mastery, and engineering. Early socialization into, and comfort with guns, appeared to enable participants to receive social rewards from firearms training unconnected to salient ingroup/outgroup divides. This aligns with prior research noting the presence of a ‘gun owner identity’ that may cut across racial and gender cleavages (cf. Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild 2019).

As emphasized in the last two chapters, it may be helpful to conceptualize arms training as a form of socialization that happens to skew towards white, male demographics for all of the institutional and sociostructural reasons chronicled previously. Prior survey evidence suggests that early exposure to firearms helps predict future gun ownership—to the point that whether a parent owned a gun is one of the best single predictors of later ownership (cf. Hepburn 2007, 16; Follingstad et al. 2016; Primm, Regoli, and Hewitt 2009, 66; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 11-13, 112; Gresham and Demuth 2020).

In short, while ingroup/outgroup mechanisms are unquestionably important for understanding why individuals find defensive arming meaningful, these structural indicators do not present a full causal story for micro-level motivations in this sample. The next chapter turns to religious, conspiracist, and political beliefs to help further unravel the question of defensive arming.

5. Religious, Conspiracist, and Political Beliefs and Armed Mobilization

Introduction

In the last two chapters I evaluated participant discourse for evidence of worldviews and stated motivations rooted in economic and social resentment. In this chapter I consider belief-oriented explanations for armed group mobilization in the United States. In prior political research, religious, conspiracist, hyper-partisan, and ‘radical’ localist beliefs are all argued to increase actors’ perceptions of threat by framing politics in zero-sum or dualistic lenses. I ask whether these documented religious, conspiracist, and political beliefs appear in participant discourse, and whether these beliefs are observable in groups’ goals, rhetoric, and activities.

In the first two sections I review participant and group discourse for evidence of religious and conspiracist beliefs. I only find religious references among a small minority of militia participants and groups: in the discourse of one group and one participant in a different militia. Despite desirability bias concerns, references to conspiracy do appear in militia discourse, but these references are only present in three of my militia interviews—or 27 percent of interviewed militia members. At the group level, conspiracist language only appears in the rhetoric of one militia group. Within this religious and conspiracist minority, I find these beliefs appear to exacerbate fears of violence from other actors and government bodies, increasing the urgency and meaning of armed defensive action.

However, as discussed in the next chapter, the conspiratorial beliefs documented in this research draw on actors’ concerns of governmental overreach, sentiments of political distrust, and uncertainty about government’s ability to respond in times of crisis. Understanding how participants relate political distrust to their political and socioeconomic beliefs, as well as interpretations of their own reasons for action, is shown to be an important, yet often unobserved factor, for armed actors in this research.

Third, I consider whether partisanship or political beliefs (i.e., traditional measures of political ‘ideology’) influence participants’ stated motivations, or the structure, goals, and rhetoric of armed groups in this sample. Participants do not provide strong discursive evidence that hyper-partisanship or political beliefs influence their own stated

reasons for joining armed groups. However, Marxist and localist beliefs appear in group and participant accounts noting how these beliefs help structure groups' appeals, organizational structures, and interactions between members. Notably, community defense groups formed around the protection of targeted constituencies did not provide strong discursive evidence that political beliefs consciously influenced or directed individual action or group goals.

Finally, I discuss participant and group discourse on a different dimension of state power: the normative size, scope, and role of government as a violent enforcer of order. All participant interviews referenced a belief in an individual responsibility for community and personal defense. Many leftist and militia participants explicitly elaborated on how civilian arms are a necessary check on government abuse. Observations here suggest that participants' political beliefs may offer an important enabling frame for action by allowing actors to interpret their defensive arming as a public good.

As discussed in Chapter 2, 'neoliberal' framings of an individualized responsibility for communal defense arose in the late 1960s alongside new approaches to policing, new gun rights discourses, and revised framings of the causes of crime (cf. Kapczynski and Purdy 2018; Carlson 2012, 2014, 2018, 68-69; Garland 1996, 1997; Squires 2000, 9, 28-29; Gahman 2015; Bettache and Chiu 2019; Esposito and Finley 2014; Kaplan-Lyman 2012; Wacquant 2009; Rose 2000). The accompanying shift in public perception from internal order as a responsibility of government to one shouldered by individuals, communities, and private actors coincided with the emergence of armed groups in the 1970s, as well as individualist interpretations of the Second Amendment as a private right to armed defense against crime. As a contemporary structural change, the political face of neoliberalism entrenched, exacerbated, and created narratives around individualized 'criminal' actors.

Concurrently, increasingly salient beliefs in an individualized responsibility for counteracting 'rising crime' appear to have offered important enabling worldviews for the armed groups studied here. However, while these individual responsibility beliefs influence the structures, goals, and activities of all armed groups in this sample, these macro level political frames do not appear as frequently in participants' stated motivations for membership. Overall, previously documented beliefs argued to be relevant for armed mobilization do not appear to fully unravel the story of why my participants feel their armed group membership is important. Such observations are in

part intuitive given the multidimensionality of actors' motives, as well as the dynamic nature of publicly salient beliefs. The next chapter draws attention to a currently unobserved belief found to be important in my participants' accounts of action: the role of political trust. In short, observations in this chapter once again more accurately situate armed actors in this research as a product of contemporary shifts in government policy and political framings around private violence.

I. Religious Rhetoric and Affiliation in Armed Groups

To understand if religious beliefs appear in groups' goals, strategies, and motivations, I reviewed the mission statements and public appeals of 29 groups affiliated with my participant sample of 29 individuals.¹⁶⁹ Religious terms and references do not appear in the majority of interviews or group recruitment materials.¹⁷⁰

Only one group, the Texas Militia, relies on expressly religious appeals. As discussed in the Introduction, this militia provided collective answers to my questions (rather than responding as individual participants). When I ask what the Second Amendment means to them, the Texas Militia responds that, “without our Second Amendment God-given right to keep and bear firearms the US Constitution is worthless. UK citizens bow down to your false king (or queen). We have no King but Jesus . . . Militiamen realize, as did the founding fathers who threw off the tyranny of the British, that our rights come directly from God himself who is a higher authority than any government.”¹⁷¹

Despite finding limited evidence that armed groups in my sample embrace religious rhetoric, individual participants may still interpret their own membership and motivations through religiously-tinted worldviews. At the end of each interview I asked participants whether they practice any religion or hold any spiritual or religious beliefs. The self-reported religious affiliations of 27 participants is presented in Figure 5.1.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ This is necessarily smaller than the full sample of armed groups in this research, as underground organizations do not have public appeals.

¹⁷⁰ I do not code membership oaths, such as that of the Oath Keepers, as religious if they end in “so help me God” and no other religious references are present. This phrasing matches the US Military’s Oath of Enlistment and is better interpreted as a reference to armed services (10 USC § 502; see also <https://www.army.mil/values/oath.html>).

¹⁷¹ All participants were made aware of both my affiliation with LSE and my upbringing in rural Kentucky before agreeing to interviews.

¹⁷² Two militia participants declined to answer. For some individuals, religious affiliation may constitute identifying information. In an abundance of caution I do not report pseudonyms alongside religious affiliations.

As predicted by national partisan and social divides, militia members are more likely to report being Christian, while leftist and community defense group members are more likely to hold no religious adherence or express agnostic/atheist beliefs.

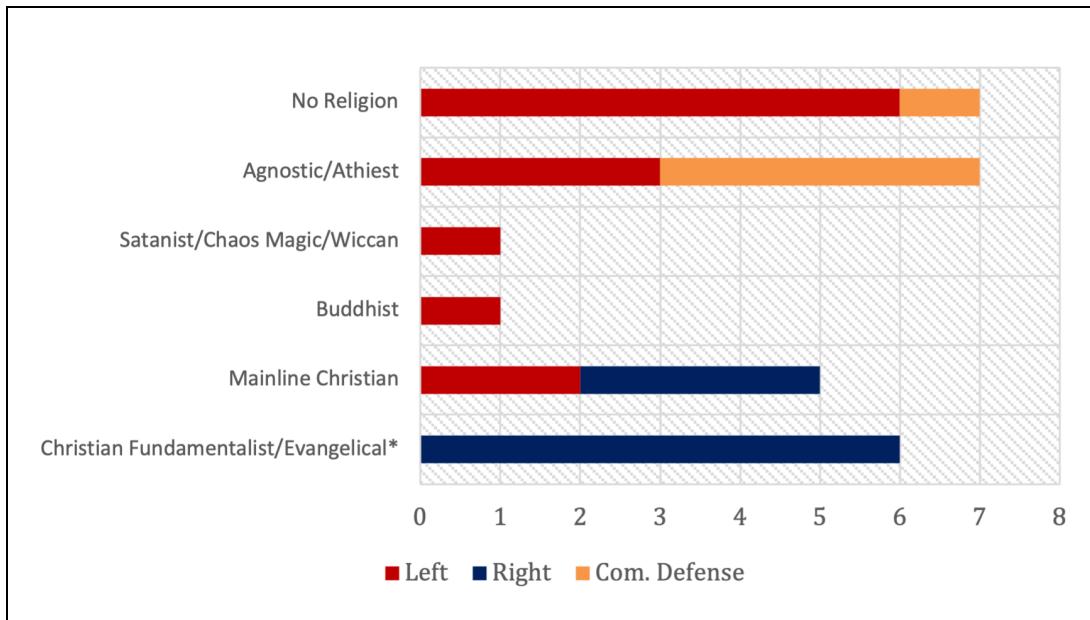


FIGURE 5.1. Participants' religious affiliation by group (n=27)

*Evangelical Christianity is defined as a belief in salvation through conversion—being ‘born again’—and originates with US revivalist movements in the 18th and 19th centuries. I understand Christian fundamentalism as a doctrinal emphasis on the literal interpretation of religious texts. This definition is broader than some understandings of the term ‘Fundamentalist’ in the US context, which can also refer to the Fundamentalist movement beginning in the 1910s: a schism from mainline Christian churches in response to the theological reconciliation of scientific discoveries, such as evolution, with Protestantism (sometimes known as the Modernist Controversy or Debate) (cf. Gundlach 2019).

During the course of interviews, only one militia member framed their actions using religious references. When I ask Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) why he started his militia, he replies, “I’m not a bible thumper, but in scripture it talks about how these things are going to happen, and darn if they’re not happening. And so, it’s not going to get any better. So like-minded people need to come together if they’re going to survive.” Josh’s references to Christianity are even more explicit when I ask about gun rights: “Well, what is our Constitution? It’s a Bill of Rights that gives us inalienable rights. [But] by our Father, by our very existence, God gave us certain rights, all right? And we had those rights before they were recognized on paper. All men have those rights.”¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Question: Why do you think the Second Amendment is important?

All other participants in this research were more cautious in their religious references, and did not mention their spiritual beliefs except where relevant. For example, David (KDLM: 1342898) describes himself as an ‘ultraconservative’ Fundamentalist Baptist that follows Christian news sources. However, David is rhetorically considerate when he uses a religious metaphor during our conversation: “I don’t know if you’re a religious person or not—and it doesn’t matter—but I think if you’re travelling and you’re a churchgoing person . . . you just run down the street and go to church. And it might not be the church you go to, and it might not even be the same denomination you go to, but you’re going to get something good out of that church service.”

Overall, as predicted in prior literature, religious adherence shows some relationship to armed group choice in this sample, however, religious discourse only appears among a very small percentage of militias. Both of these observations suggest that religion is not a substantively important worldview for armed actors in this research. Counterintuitively, evidence in this section supports scholarship that argues fundamentalist religious adherence may increase actors’ potential for violence (cf. Juergensmeyer 2008, 2003; Toft and Zhukov 2015). Groups in this sample adopt rhetorically defensive, rather than explicitly politically violent, strategies. Although religious beliefs do not appear as salient in armed group rhetoric on the right as chronicled in prior decades, conspiracies connected with Christian millenarianism, and more recently QAnon, are also argued to mobilize actors on the armed right.

II. Conspiricism in Armed Groups

In this section I analyze participant and group discourse for evidence of conspiracist beliefs. As with religion, I find conspiracist worldviews to be concentrated among a minority of militia groups and participants in my sample. An investigation of conspiracy discourse within these participant interviews further suggests that actors in this research do not perceive their conspiracy belief as a conscious reason for mobilization. Rather, participant discourse suggests that conspiracist worldviews encourage armed action through perceptions of government weakness—not government strength. In other words, the militia accounts in this research emphasize how conspiracist ideas can intertwine with more realistic fears of institutional failure and routine corruption. Militia

members in this sample appeared more concerned with pragmatic scenarios of government collapse than with the unlikely success of conspiratorial plots.

From a survey of 29 group appeals, I find that the Texas Militia is the only group that references conspiratorial belief. I did not find evidence of conspiracy belief in leftist or community defense groups in my sample. The Texas Militia tells me that “militias are for enforcing the US Constitution and recognizing it as the supreme law of the land superior to any international treaties and superior to any United Nations rulings.” Coupled with evidence in the previous section of the strong religious appeals of this group, we can reasonably extrapolate that the United Nations reference overlaps with belief in New World Order (NWO) conspiracies.¹⁷⁴

A review of 29 participant accounts uncovers similar patterns, with only four individuals referencing conspiracies (or 36 percent of sampled militia members). While use of conspiracist rhetoric is higher in my participant population than in the group survey, participants primarily referenced publicly salient conspiracist language associated with QAnon and some national Republican Party rhetoric.

The New World Order conspiracy appears in two militia interviews. David (KDLM: 1342898) tells me gun control is “part of the New World Order and socialistic movements to control our healthcare, to control our ability to protect ourselves, to control our education; that’s all about bringing in socialistic ideological things into our society, in my opinion.”¹⁷⁵ While more subtle in his references, Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) also frames some of his answers in reference to NWO theories. When I ask what he feels are the greatest problems threatening the US, Matt responds:

I mean, I got my own opinions, but I believe there is something else working against us. I mean, c’mom now, it’s America—the greatest country in the world. If you can take over America, you own the world . . . Ten years ago, do you remember the pride that America had, though? . . . I mean, whoever our enemy is right now, they’re winning. They’re doing real good, but we got a hold on it, somehow . . . It’s like I said, we’re sheep.

¹⁷⁴ The antisemitic New World Order conspiracy holds that a cabal of rich, Jewish elites (e.g., George Soros and the Rothschilds) are intent on global domination. International organizations such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund are viewed as a “Jewish conspiracy” to destroy US democracy (cf. Barkun 1997, 257-258).

¹⁷⁵ Question: Why do you think some people are in favor of stricter gun control?

Matt unequivocally answers the next question, ‘Do you think the US is headed in the right direction,’ with a resounding no.¹⁷⁶

Outside the NWO conspiracy prominently catalogued in 1990s militia groups, several participants referenced conspiracies around Covid-19, or associated with QAnon.¹⁷⁷ When I ask Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) why it is important to own guns, he tells me that “several countries are now arresting people who have not taken the ‘vaccine’—and the only reason that is not happening in the US is because of gun ownership.” Toward the end of our interview, Ohio Defense Force member Rob (1793091) confides, “there’s a deep state coup against Trump. That’ll be in the history books . . . You’re telling the FBI and DOJ to not follow the President’s orders, but *he’s* a racist and fascist? Epstein killed himself in a max prison? I knew he’d never make it to court.”

Rob is far from alone in his assessment of Jeffrey Epstein’s death (cf. Shamsian 2019). Sovereign Citizen (SC) Tom (1758297) also believes Epstein was murdered. Tom does not own a gun or belong to an armed group, yet he is by far the most conspiratorial individual I encountered in my fieldwork. Whenever we meet Tom openly shares—and tries to convince others—of a host of conspiracies updated for current events. Throughout our various conversations, Tom (SC: 1758297) earnestly explains how Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain were murdered by the Clintons, 5G causes Covid-19, vaccines are a cover to implant tracking devices, and how the government uses chemtrails to ‘mind control’ citizens. Rather than mere rhetorical posturing, these fears changed Tom’s behaviors, who began turning his wi-fi router off at night to protect himself from being ‘infected’ with Covid-19 from his 5G internet.

A potential takeaway from this informal comparison is that the most conspiratorial worldview documented in my sample (in terms of both open adherence to conspiracy and distrust of centralized media and authority), originates from a Sovereign Citizen who is neither an armed group member nor a gun owner. In contrast to other interviews,

¹⁷⁶ Matthew (East KY Militia: 4359402) also demonstrates some adherence to mainstream conspiracies, notably Area 51. When I ask why individuals fear militias, Matt replies: “It’s the lack of information, you know what I mean? And that’s just how it’s going to be, though, because some things people just don’t need to know. Some people ain’t capable with certain information. Example: Area 51. The public don’t need to know everything. They can’t handle it.”

¹⁷⁷ QAnon is shorthand for conspiracy theories evolving from an internet culture largely based around the belief that prominent celebrities and Democrats are part of a satanic, child trafficking ring. QAnon conspiracies are connected to both the December 2016 ‘Pizzagate’ shooting at Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC, as well as January 6 (cf. Moskalenko and McCauley 2021; MacMillen and Rush 2021)

where references to conspiracy were limited, Tom's (1758297) conversations were dominated by his conspiratorial understandings. This example illuminates how conspiratorial belief is unlikely to hold a linear or simplistic relationship to armed mobilization (cf. Bennett 1995, 463-466), especially at the actor level.

What participant and group accounts in this section do demonstrate, however, is how conspiratorial belief can heighten participants' fears (real or imagined) of societal collapse and government failure. As I discuss in Chapter 6, conspiracy in my sample intertwines with more prominent and vocalized sentiments of political distrust shared by nearly all individuals in this research. Both of these chapters build on and help elaborate more proximate and actor-identified motivations for action that intertwine with the socioeconomic beliefs and concerns discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The relative absence of religious and conspiracist appeals in this study aligns with results from prior scholarship on the Militia Movement, which observes a shift from overt conspiracist, white supremacist, and fundamentalist rhetoric following the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (cf. Barkun 1997, 288-290; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 295-297; Melder 2014, 612; Belew 2018, 192-194).¹⁷⁸ The growth of arms training organizations on the left, and among targeted communities, has similarly opened the market of armed groups to include those with secular appeals.

In the next section I evaluate group and participant discourse for evidence of motivational beliefs tied to the proper role of government in regulating society. While the previous sections on religion and conspiric平ism concentrated on my militia participants, in the following sections left-wing armed groups and critics of capitalism move to the fore.

III. Political Beliefs and Armed Groups

In the previous section I reviewed participant and armed group data to probe for the presence of 'fringe' beliefs: fundamentalist religion and conspiric平ism. In the following sections I analyze how political beliefs appear in participants' stated motivations for membership, as well as in group mission statements, goals, and structures. While partisan identity and political beliefs do not figure prominently in participants' explanations for their own action, localist and Marxist beliefs do appear to heavily shape

¹⁷⁸ The degree to which this change was the result of intentional mainstreaming by militia 'elites,' a response to changing membership bases within these groups, or both is debated.

the actions and appeals of militias and leftist armed groups in this research. In community defense groups, political beliefs beyond private armed defense do not appear in group rhetoric, goals, or mission statements.

I first review data on participants' partisan and political affiliations, as well as evidence of how participants perceive government's role in rectifying inequalities and regulating national wealth. Anti-capitalist, Marxist, and/or socialist beliefs appear in all left-leaning participant and group discourse, except for the previously noted exception of the Liberal Gun Club. Among militias, fears of more equitable wealth redistribution rhetorically reinforced the need for defensive arms as a response to government expansion and 'socialist creep.'

Overall, however, participants primarily referenced political beliefs when interpreting politics and diagnosing societal problems. Marxist actors in this research did not feel they had joined their groups due to a committed belief in forming an 'armed vanguard.' Instead, participants shared how their motivations stemmed from a desire to remedy the immediate effects of capitalist exploitation and white supremacy. Similarly, while militias rhetorically support localist political beliefs, groups in this sample pragmatically organized community defense for future exigencies, rather than to campaign against 'big' government. In other words, actors in this research did not provide much discursive evidence that they were motivated to political action with goals to change government or the state writ large. This does not mean political beliefs are absent in how actors interpret the world, but rather that the actors studied here are not mobilizing into armed groups to execute a political program, as some traditional political action accounts might predict.

Participants' Partisanship and Political Beliefs

All armed groups in this research formally adopt non-partisan policies. Non-partisanship likely reflects efforts to meet federal requirements for incorporation as a non-profit with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, which a majority of armed groups in this research maintain (IRS 2021). At the micro level, despite reporting high levels of political engagement in terms of voting, protesting, and constituent lobbying (see Chapter 6), participants do not provide strong rhetorical evidence of hyper-partisanship. I first asked participants whether they felt any political parties represented their views, and why or why not. Self-reported partisanship is summarized in Figure 5.2.

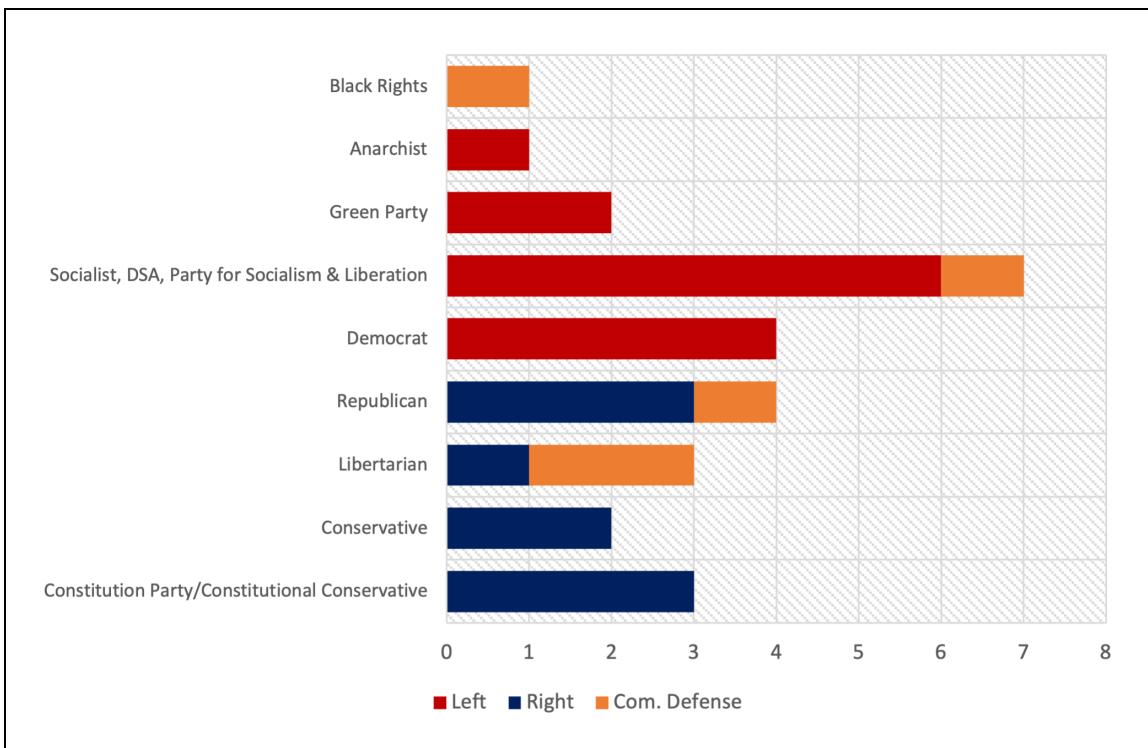


FIGURE 5.2. Participants' partisanship by group (n=27)

Partisanship among participants reflects well-established political trends documented in the US electorate, with the exception that only around 30 percent of my sample identified with a major political party (i.e., Republican or Democrat).¹⁷⁹ In contrast, Gallup reported in 2021 that 56 percent of Americans identified as either a Republican or a Democrat, and a 2017 Pew survey estimated that 59 percent of registered voters identified with one of the two major parties (Jones 2022; Pew 2018).¹⁸⁰ As I discuss in the next chapter, affiliation with third parties in this sample is likely related to participants' high levels of distrust in political elites.

Perhaps surprisingly, community defense group members in my sample skewed libertarian. An exception to this is Massachusetts Pink Pistols member Nick (2910720), who adds that, “my experiences as a gay, borderline-socialist liberal/leftist are probably not typical of most American gun owners. That said, we’re out there!” Overall, political beliefs focusing on socioeconomic power imbalances were absent in community

¹⁷⁹ N=27. Two militia interviews at the beginning of research did not include this question.

¹⁸⁰ Jones 2022: “Overall in 2021, an average of 29% of Americans identified as Democrats, 27% as Republicans, and 42% as independents. Roughly equal proportions of independents leaned to the Democratic Party (17%) and to the Republican Party (16%).”

defense group interviews. When I ask Pink Pistols member Justin (GA PP: 4659213) about the SRA, he tells me:

More power to them. I am all for diversifying gun ownership. I am sympathetic to socialist causes, but I am by no means a Marxist. Like, I am skeptical of any one person obtaining a billion dollars ethically . . . So, I could be talked into accepting a little bit of wealth distribution, or maybe a little bit of guillotining [laughs]. Again, I am personally a very nonviolent person, and while I am sympathetic to the workers' plight, and I am familiar enough with Marxist ideology to see where they are coming from . . . I think there are better ways than arming for a revolution . . . I encourage them to study guns safely and to exercise their rights, but as soon as they start shooting for political gains—expect others to shoot back [laughs].

Among militia members, Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) jokes, “I don’t have enough money to be a Republican, so that is why I am not a Republican . . . I am not a member of the good ol’ boys club, that is for sure. But I am not for a party of bleeding-heart liberals, give it all away and become happy socialists.” Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) similarly tells me that, “my current state government lets me down too much by compromising with The Left® too often. We have a supermajority of Republicans in the House and the Senate and have no reason to need to compromise.”¹⁸¹ Joseph identifies with the Constitution Party, and tells me, “Republicans are simply Democrats driving the country over the cliff at the speed limit instead of 90 miles per hour. Libertarians (Libertardians, Libertarians) don’t have any real solid morals—they just complain about the party that is in power and how it goes against ‘their views.’”

On the left, most armed group members responded similarly to SRA member Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463), who tells me that no political parties “substantially represent my views. I believe the state is a huge component in the oppression and exploitation of people, and I do not see a candidate or a party that supports that position. There are some parties that are anti-capitalists; however, I only align with some of their stances, but not enough to make me a supporter of the party.” Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) explains, “I trust no politicians who run on any type of capitalist platform. That’s not to say I disagree with everything these politicians do, some are doing a decent job, but I do not trust them.” Alex (JBGC: 4770945) answers that no political parties represent them, as they are “an anarchist with a smidge of communism mixed in.” Alex

¹⁸¹ This was a written response. “The Left®” is participant’s own phrasing.

votes in all local elections, but they “abstain from voting for President ‘cause all the candidates suck.”

At least four of my 13 leftist participants (31%) explicitly described their political beliefs in Marxist terms during our conversations. Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) says, “I’m a pretty hard-left Marxist-Leninist, but I do find hope in the Bernie Sanders movement Maybe I’m getting old. I’m getting soft and I might be some sort of like Democratic Socialist at this point really [laughs].”¹⁸² JBGC member William (1390238) similarly adopts a Marxist lens when he tells me that “any police force under capitalism is an organization that only exists to crush the working class, ensure that poverty is as miserable a condition as possible, and enforce the will of the wealthy ruling class.”¹⁸³

When asked, ‘Who should own a gun,’ Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) replies, “the Proletariat and the oppressed.” Tyler explains that armed groups similar to the SRA are important because, in addition to participating in mutual aid, “we bring attention to issues that are overlooked by many people, and we practice socialist principles that place the importance of the community over the individual. We train, but we also educate.”

When I ask Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) about the major issues today, he replies, “the reality is that there are too many individual problems to list, from climate change to exploitation of labor’s surplus value. What is perhaps a shorter list are the causes of these problems. Those causes are capitalism, the state that protects capitalism, and the many forms of fascism and oppression the state and capitalists use to maintain its control over the rest of the populace.” Shawn tells me that government is only “effective from the perspective of protecting and supporting the interests of the capitalist class. It is doing exactly what it was designed to do . . . In a more just universe, the actions of the state would look nothing like what we see today.”

In participant interviews, members of the SRA were the most likely to reference Marxist political beliefs, but these references were not often raised as reasons for why they joined their chapter. To briefly conclude, participants’ partisanship and political discourse around government’s role in rectifying socioeconomic inequalities largely matched established divides between the national political ‘left’ and ‘right.’ However,

¹⁸² Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) goes on to clarify, “Yeah, I mean, but it’s one of those things where it’s like—it very much is, like, a socialism or barbarism situation for me. We’re either going to have a government and a state that people feel invested in . . . or we’ll just be particularly vulnerable to incidents that in the past would have been isolated—like, growing really, really, really out of control and spiraling into an incredibly dark, bad place.”

¹⁸³ Question: What about local and state police, law enforcement, and justice systems? Do they do a good job in your community and state?

armed group members in my sample expressed disaffection from major political parties at much higher rates than those recorded in the US population (i.e., only 30 percent of my sample identified with one of the two major political parties, compared to around 55 to 60 percent of the US electorate). In the next section I turn to group-level discourse to ask whether political beliefs appear to significantly influence the goals, strategies, and activities of the armed groups studied here.

Marxism on the Armed Left

Unsurprisingly, discursive data collected from defense groups on the left slants heavily toward political beliefs in the state's responsibility to regulate social inequalities. All but two of the public-facing leftist groups in this research employed Marxist and/or socialist rhetoric around empowering the working class and proletariat in mission statements, materials, and branding (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4).¹⁸⁴ In its incorporation bylaws, the SRA defines itself as: "an educational organization dedicated to providing the working class with the information they need to be effectively armed for self and community defense . . . We maintain the necessity of and work towards the implementation of an anti-capitalist platform for protecting and promoting the inherent human right to defend oneself and one's community."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ The anonymized leftist defense group in Florida focuses its language around mutual aid and does not explicitly reference empowering working classes, capitalist exploitation, etc. As briefly noted in the Introduction, the Liberal Gun Club is counted as 'leftist' due to its organization around political beliefs (rather than constituency-based defense). The member interviewed for this research demonstrated liberal beliefs aligned with mainstream Democratic Party preferences.

¹⁸⁵ See SRA 'About' page under 'We Keep Us Safe' at <https://socialistra.org/about/>, and September 2019 incorporation bylaws at <https://socialistra.org/resolutions/>, accessed April 30, 2022.



FIGURE 5.3. Rhode Island John Brown Gun Club logo

Reprinted from RIJBGC website, accessed March 1, 2022 at <http://rijohnbrowngun.club>.



FIGURE 5.4. National Socialist Rifle Association logo

Reprinted from SRA website, accessed March 1, 2022 at <https://socialistra.org>.

The Rhode Island JBGC similarly describes itself as “a leftist, working-class community defense organization based in and serving the communities of Rhode Island.”¹⁸⁶ And on its homepage, the Puget Sound JBGC states that it is “an anti-fascist, anti-racist, pro-worker community defense organization committed to accountable, community-led defense . . . We believe in active resistance to the corrosive and destructive social effects of white supremacy, sexism, bigotry, and economic exploitation. We stand in defense of the well-being of the community over the enrichment of the individual, and we stand in solidarity with those who share our mission for a just future.”¹⁸⁷

Socialist or Marxist beliefs also appear to direct the outreach and activities of leftist groups. Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) tells me how his socialist armed group in Kentucky started in 2013 with the intent of building an organizational structure around “the class of folks with some college education or college degree who are working low-income service jobs.” Jeff (2867389) indicates that his group intentionally never asked members to adopt an official ‘ideological stance,’ as members and potential recruits in the younger demographic “had a lot of different ideas about what [socialism] meant to them.” William (1390238) similarly tells me that within his JBGC chapter he is “one of only a

¹⁸⁶ See RIJBGC homepage, accessed March 1, 2022 at <http://rijohnbrowngun.club>.

¹⁸⁷ See PSJBGC homepage, accessed March 1, 2022 at <https://psjbgc.org>.

small handful of Communists in the group. The bulk of the membership are Anarchists, but we're able to put aside our differences to work together toward our common goals!"

An informational pamphlet from the SRA confirms that the group "welcomes any working class, progressive, anarchist, socialist, communist, eco-warrior, animal liberator, anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, PoC, LGBTQ+, or anyone who is interested in learning about firearms and all forms self- and community-defense."¹⁸⁸ Instead of 'pushing a line,' Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) tells me that his armed group instead focused on actions that demonstrated working class solidarity: "we just got involved in working class struggles, and so we did like picket union stuff, and eviction blockades, and fighting peoples' bosses. And, you know, we would never lie about who we were, and we were very open, and no one turned us away." A Pennsylvania chapter of the SRA in this research similarly focuses on community outreach and mutual aid alongside arms training: "We shoot, but we also do food and clothing drives. We provide our knowledge and experience to anyone who needs it, and we're always looking for underserved and marginalized communities that need aid" (Tyler, PA SRA: 2911613).¹⁸⁹

As a group organizer, Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) connects the inclusive, working-class appeals of his socialist group with its recruitment success. Jeff contrasts his group with the more insular appeals of neo-Nazi organizations he has encountered in the state: "their values fundamentally make them poor at organizing. You know what I mean? Like, if you don't like other people and, like, don't really understand collective action [laughs] um, then, you know, yeah, you're not going to be able to deploy. But that said . . . there's folks at the League of Saint Ambrose that operate in eastern Tennessee and they've . . . done incredibly, incredibly violent things and that's just, like, 12 guys."

In terms of organizational structure, leftist groups predominantly adopt horizontal models linked to a theoretical understanding of inclusive socialist action.¹⁹⁰ Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) tells me, "we are all equals. SRA chapters are very autonomous, but we do have a set of bylaws that govern and lay out basic principles for the group. We have a small group of people who plan and organize, but there is no hierarchy in the group."

¹⁸⁸ See 'Intro to the SRA Trifold' on the 'Resources' page of the SRA website, accessed December 8, 2020 at <https://socialistra.org/resources/>.

¹⁸⁹ Question: Why do you think groups like yours are important?

¹⁹⁰ There is some variation in whether groups adopt flat models or more hierarchical structures with elected officers and commanders. The latter model that more closely matches paramilitarism was usually found in underground or informal tactical defense groups that offer security at protests (see Chapter 6 for more detail on groups' protest engagement).

A Wisconsin chapter of the SRA is organized similarly. Jacob (WI SRA: 330961) describes how his group has “kind of a horizontal power structure in the chapter which operates on a volunteer basis, so it’s a little more anarchic in that style—where if you want to fill a role you volunteer yourself, and people don’t think that you shouldn’t do it. So basically, as long as no one votes against you, go for it; take the lead. And that goes for like calling general meetings or planning community events or whatever.”

When I ask about leadership positions in their JBGC chapter, Alex (4770945) similarly tells me that their group does not “have an official hierarchy, but I keep all of our supplies since I live alone and have a big basement for storage. I’m also one of a few people who engage via our official club social media accounts (Twitter and Instagram); I network with other mutual aid organizations to get supplies or do fundraisers.” Fellow chapter member William (JBGC: 1390238) confirms that their “group is horizontally organized, but I am one of the older members—both in terms of being in the group for a long time, and also being literally older than everyone else. So, people tend to at least take what I say seriously, even if my ideas aren’t always the ones that win out. My unofficial role is to just help keep momentum up and keep people motivated.”

As noted in the Introduction to this research, one SRA chapter and an anonymized socialist firearms education organization in the southwest decided to respond to interview questions through consensually-agreed responses.¹⁹¹ The Orange County SRA tells me that they “provide spaces and networks for anti-capitalists wherever our chapters are located . . . We find the exploitation against communities by the status quo to be endemic to profit-driven investing into concentrations of industry and wealth generation, capital. With this we find it vitally important to provide access to necessary goods through mutual aid to our community, access to self-defense through firearms training, and education/discussion spaces outside of capitalist status quo.”

Political beliefs also appear to shape members’ interactions on the armed left. As observed in some group rhetoric above, and in prior chapters, SRA members frequently refer to one another as ‘comrades.’ Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) says he heard about the

¹⁹¹ The southwestern group adopts an explicitly socialist stance, but did not directly reference Marxist beliefs in responses. The Texas Militia also sent a collective response. Based on interactions with armed groups over the course of my fieldwork, my impression is that the collective responses from socialist groups resulted from the groups’ organizational structures, while the militia’s response likely reflected an attempt to further blind me to the identity of group members. These are informal hunches only, and I do not have a way to confirm these intuitions.

SRA “from another gun owning comrade,” and during our interview Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) similarly refers to fellow members as comrades. In addition, some participants expressed appreciation for the social elements of their membership connected with political beliefs. SRA member Jacob (330961) tells me how his group’s Discord (social media) helped him feel less alone during the pandemic, and that he particularly enjoyed sharing socialist memes with other members. Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) responds that their favorite part of membership is “meeting new people and learning together! I particularly enjoy our book club. It’s gotten me back into reading and I’ve learned so much from it.”

Political disagreements also played a role in some SRA defections. Two participants—who are not disclosed here—defected from SRA chapters to underground leftist defense groups due to disagreements around the mission and goals of their chapters.¹⁹² Similarly, a member of a public-facing leftist defense group in Florida, Brandon (894948), tells me that his group formed because:

We grew tired of having to deal with [SRA] national . . . They were untimely, or leadership would change and we’d have to start over . . . so we broke off and did our own thing. Turns out it might have been the right call. Some SRA groups seem to attract what we call ‘tankies,’ which are a type of ‘aesthetic leftist.’ [Tankies are] people who tend to be a leftist mostly for the Stalinist or North Korean aesthetics (Hammer and Sickle, red flags, agitprop) . . . while ignoring or defending the atrocities committed by these entities. By no means does this represent all of SRA, but we found it to be often enough that it has become a type of meme in our groups.

A fourth participant defected from a failing SRA chapter for a leftist defense group focused on mutual aid. Zach (FL Left: 3028541) tells me he found out about his group “through the SRA. My area’s SRA chapter fell apart and many members then created [our group], which more closely aligns with my values.”

It is important to quickly reiterate that arms training groups such as the SRA focus their activities on community firearms training and mutual aid, rather than militant organizing. While Marxist and socialist beliefs clearly influence how these organizations perceive themselves and their organizational goals, the SRA and similar groups on the left are not organizing an armed proletariat for a directed political mission. As Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) elaborates, “like I said, I don’t think it’s a situation where

¹⁹² I do not disclose those in underground groups due to security concerns.

there will be a true, armed vanguard party taking power in the United States.” In the next section I turn to participant and group discourse on the militia right.

Localism and Militias

All but one militia in this sample implicitly relied on localist beliefs in their appeals by definition: these armed groups organize under the premise of constitutionally-sanctioned, private armed defense. Self-described ‘constitutional’ militias frequently reference the historical connection between these forces and state and county authority. David (1342898), for instance, describes his Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia as “there in support of our governor’s decisions. We are not anti-government people. We support our local sheriffs . . . We are very much in support of our local law enforcement and our state government. So, essentially, we train to be the last line of defense, which is what the Constitution tells us that we’re supposed to do.”¹⁹³

While many of the 12 surveyed militias relied on rhetorical appeals to localist beliefs, these same beliefs often did not appear significant in members’ discussions of their own motivations for action. The most explicitly ‘localist’ militia in this research is the Light Foot militia (LFM). In its “Militia Standards and Principles,” LFM includes a mission statement that in part reads, “to whit, that the principle of the Tenth Amendment [states’ rights] shall stand inviolate . . . That all just government is servant of the people who have instituted it; that the people should never by force, nor coercion, be obliged to anything styled as ‘law’ which . . . may be promulgated by them to bear conflict to the rights of the people . . .” (Stankiewicz 2020, 1-2).¹⁹⁴

As the Light Foot Militia’s mission revolves around restoring power to the county level, the group operates an intentionally decentralized organizational structure.¹⁹⁵ For most national chapters of militia groups, however, preferences for limited government appear to pose no contradiction to local units organized around a centralized military

¹⁹³ Question: Would you mind talking a bit about KDLM and your role in the group?

¹⁹⁴ The 10th Amendment to the US Constitution reads: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.” The issue of states’ rights and local control were repeatedly used throughout US history as a political tool for the continuance of white supremacy, especially in the Jim Crow south—to the extent that current use of ‘states’ rights’ is often understood as coded racist language.

¹⁹⁵ See LFM homepage, accessed March 5, 2022 at <http://lightfootmilitia.com>: “We are a decentralized organization of Light Foot militia battalions. United by our love of country, and by our use of the ‘Light Foot Standards’ to form local, county-based militia units. Utilizing the same Code of Conduct, Unit Structure, Rank Structure, Uniform Standard, Small Unit Tactics and Battle Drills, we are able to link up seamlessly with other Light Foot units in our state, or neighboring states, in case of local or national emergency.”

command structure. Rather, centralized military models are viewed as enabling effective tactical response at the local level, and often align with the life experiences of militia members who served in military or law enforcement.

Some participants insist their militia should not be considered a group at all, as their arms training is part of a constitutional duty, and thus represents service rather than membership. David (KDLM: 1342898) explains this distinction in relation to other “‘groups’ that call themselves militias, or call themselves Patriots, or call themselves Three Percenters, or call themselves whatever they want to call themselves . . . I’m not saying that their ideas or organizations are bad, but a militia is not a group; a militia is a constitutional duty . . . when you look at the other organizations that call themselves Patriot, or call themselves militia, or whatever, you know, they are not constitutional militias because they are asking for people to pay dues, and they are asking for people to fill out applications.”¹⁹⁶ The Light Foot Militia similarly clarifies, “we are not a ‘group’ that you join. If you are a citizen . . . then you are a member of the militia according to our Constitution and state law.”¹⁹⁷

In the few instances where groups rhetorically distanced themselves from the categorization of ‘militia,’ this often had more to do with pejorative usage of the word in media, or to avoid being included on watchdog lists. For instance, the Virginia Oath Keepers (VAOK) states that they are “not a militia. The National Militia Act of 1903 defines an organized militia as a military force that is raised from the civil population to supplement a regular army in an emergency, and an unorganized militia as every able-bodied man of at least 17 and under 45 years of age, not a member of the State Guard or Naval Militia. We are, however, prepared, when requested, to support state and local authorities during natural or man-made disasters.” Despite rhetorically aligning itself against localist framings, the VAOK lists its “core principle” as “Defending the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic” (“VAOK Talking Points,” document sent to author, Aug. 21, 2021, see Appendix 4).

In short, localist and constitutionalist beliefs heavily saturated militia group discourse, but much like leftist members in this research, these beliefs were noticeably absent in participants’ accounts of why they joined their armed groups.

¹⁹⁶ Question: Would you mind talking a bit about KDLM and your role in the group?

¹⁹⁷ See “How to Start a Unit” on LFM website, accessed March 1, 2022 at <http://lightfootmilitia.com/start-a-unit.html>.

IV. Armed Groups and Privatized Defense

In this section I analyze two manifestations of beliefs supporting privatized and individualized responsibilities for public security: individualist interpretations of gun rights; and the necessity of armed citizenries as a check on government's concentration of power. I first evaluate group discourse, where I find significant references to armed self-defense rights as part of an individual responsibility for community defense. I then discuss how my participants from across the political spectrum all reference armed citizenries and proletariats as important safeguards against government abuse of power. At the micro level, participants use discourse around an individual responsibility for community defense to help explain the importance of their armed actions.

As the next chapter illustrates, theoretical justifications for private arms become self-reinforcing over time through personal experiences with government inefficacy. Structurally, as government delegates responsibility for controlling violence to private forces—and responsibility for crime to 'bad actors'—community defense increasingly comes to be perceived as a good that is expected to be provided privately and communally, rather than by government and police. As Eric Klinenberg (2001, 80) summarizes in reference to Robert Putnam's seminal work on social capital, "the elevation of policing into a mode of social integration marks a disturbing trend toward a society where distrust, suspicion, and fear are organizing principles of politics and culture . . . Americans may be bowling alone, but they are policing together with unparalleled enthusiasm."

Group Appeals to Private Defense

References to gun rights and arms training as fulfilling an individual right to self-defense appeared across all armed group discourse surveyed in this research. As discussed in the previous chapter, community defense group members in this sample explicitly connect gun rights with the provision of particularized defense for targeted populations. The utility manual for the Pink Pistols emphasizes that they are "a 'single-issue' organization. This means that we have ONE, and only ONE, issue that lies at the core of our motivations and actions . . . We are dedicated to the legal, safe, and responsible use of firearms for self-defense of the sexual minority community . . . Self-defense is our RIGHT" (Patton 2013).

Similarly, the National African American Gun Association defines itself as “a pro-Second Amendment organization focused on the preservation of our community through armed protection and community building . . . The long-term goal of the National African American Gun Association is to have every African American introduced to firearm use for home protection, competitive shooting, and outdoor recreational activities.”¹⁹⁸ In their central mission statement, Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership similarly prioritizes gun rights: “Destroy so-called ‘gun control’ . . . Expose the misguided notions that lead people to seek out so-called ‘gun control’ . . . Encourage Americans to understand and defend all of the Bill of Rights for all citizens. The Second Amendment is the ‘Guardian’ of the Bill of Rights.”¹⁹⁹

On the left, the mission of the Socialist Rifle Association “is to uphold the right of the working class to keep and bear arms and maintain the skills necessary for self and community defense.”²⁰⁰ The Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club says on its homepage that they “fully stand for the right of all adults who would defend themselves and their communities against far-right violence. This right includes the right to own, carry, and train with tactically useful rifles, pistols, and body armor.”²⁰¹

Militia groups adopt similar references to gun rights and private defense in mission statements, organizational documents, and public outreach. However, militias diverge from leftist and community defense group rhetoric in their nationalistic and militaristic appeals. Among militia groups, beliefs in the inherent ‘good’ of the armed citizen are readily apparent in discourse and symbols. Most armed groups on the right adopt names and logos that reflect the importance of these beliefs, including the moniker ‘militia,’ a reference to defunct colonial defense forces.

A common phrase associated with fervent belief in gun rights used across militia group discourse, patches, logos, and memes is ‘Molon labe’ (Come and get [them]) (see Figure 5.5). As the Light Foot Militia explains, “our unit patch in all states . . . is a circular green patch . . . with a Spartan helmet and crossed short swords . . . Above is ‘Come and get them’ in Greek . . . It was uttered by Leonidas (King of Sparta) to Xerxes

¹⁹⁸ See “About Us” on NAAGA website, accessed December 10, 2020 at <https://naaga.co/about-us/>.

¹⁹⁹ See “About JPFO” on JPFO website, accessed December 10, 2020 at <http://jpfo.org/filegen-a-m/about.htm>.

²⁰⁰ See SRA website, accessed December 8, 2020 at <https://socialistra.org/about/>.

²⁰¹ See Puget Sound JBG homepage at <https://psjbgc.org>, accessed March 1, 2022.

(King of Persia) during the battle of Thermopylae, when Xerxes ordered Leonidas... ‘Lay down your arms!’ Leonidas’ reply will live in history: ‘Come and get them!’”²⁰²

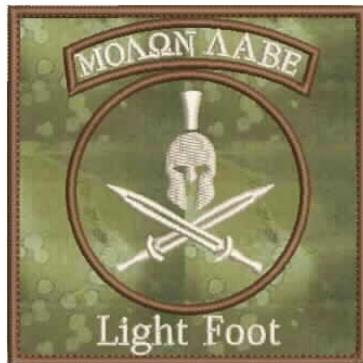


FIGURE 5.5. Light Foot Militia patch

Reprinted from Light Foot Militia website, accessed February 28, 2022 at <http://lightfootmilitia.com/what-is-lf.html>.



FIGURE 5.6. Ohio Defense Force logo

Reprinted from Ohio Defense Force homepage, accessed February 27, 2022 at <http://www.ohiodefenseforce.org>.

Militias also frequently reference symbols from the American Revolution by adopting names such as the Minutemen, Patriots, Constitutional Guard, and Defenders of Liberty.²⁰³ Images of rifles and colonial soldiers also appear across group badges, emblems, and websites. The logo of the Ohio Defense Force, for instance, visually links the image of a colonial soldier with a member of the modern US infantry (see Figure 5.6). As I show in the next section, these motifs appear to represent more than rhetorical appeals. Participant discourse similarly emphasizes the important contribution private armed groups offer to public defense.

Participant Beliefs in Private Defense

To understand how participants understand their armed groups in relation to political beliefs, I asked a number of questions probing for individuals’ normative views on firearms and the balance of physical power between citizens and government. While armed citizenries are commonly associated with the Militia Movement, leftist and community defense group members similarly embraced the idea of private arms as a

²⁰² See “What is ‘Light Foot?’” on LFM website, accessed March 1, 2022, <http://lightfootmilitia.com/what-is-lf.html>.

²⁰³ Minutemen is a reference to quickly assembled local troops used during the American Revolution.

check on government power. When I ask JBGC member William (JBGC: 1390238) why it is important to own guns, he tells me, “it’s an important survival tool, a means for self-defense, and potentially a source of political power, which Mao correctly said grows out of the barrel of a gun. Even in a situation like the current US, where I don’t think an armed revolution is even possible, an armed working class sends a message about who truly holds power.”

For William, the concentration of power in government hands is inherently problematic. When I ask about the major issues facing the US, Will (JBGC: 1390238) tells me that “the root cause of most of the world’s problems (not just the US) is the complete domination of the most powerful military and economic superpower in all of history by a tiny handful of mega-rich psychopaths. In our state, that’s led to a dangerous public indifference to public health, and it’s been a boon to efforts to disarm the working class and poor to further entrench the state’s monopoly on violence.”

Fellow JBGC chapter member Alex (JBGC: 4770945) elaborates that “one of the few things conservatives and leftists have in common, that liberals don’t seem to accept, is that the US government absolutely would harm us with weapons en masse. They don’t hesitate to turn weapons onto Water Protectors or other protestors.²⁰⁴ The Second Amendment boils down to the belief that citizens have a right to defend themselves against a tyrannical, fascist state.”²⁰⁵ When I ask Alex who should own a gun, they answer, “Everybody who’s the target of violence, so basically everybody but state actors (cops) and cishet [cisgender and heterosexual] white men.” Zach (FL Left: 3028541) replies that the right to own guns is “absolutely” important: “If the people have no arms or means to defend themselves they pose next to no threat to the government. If the government does not fear its people, then it rules its people.”

Pink Pistols member Justin (GA PP: 4659213) similarly shares that “the Second Amendment is incredibly important on a personal agency level to guarantee your own right to life and right to self-defense for yourself and those that you care about. I think that it is an important tool to be used for keeping government agents and those in positions of unlawful authority in check, but I worry about its potential for abuse in the modern era of political instability and polarization.” When I ask National African

²⁰⁴ Water Protectors is an Indigenous-led activist network formed to protect water systems.

²⁰⁵ Question: What does the Second Amendment mean to you? Is it important?

American Gun Association member Nicole (2979846) if there should be any restrictions on gun ownership, she responds, “No, those laws are rooted in antiblackness.”

Taylor (MI SRA: 4958846) tells me groups like the SRA are important because, “as stated in our SRA chapter’s mission statement, it is important to empower the working class so that everyone has the means to defend themselves and their community, whether that’s through firearms or mutual aid.” When I ask what Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) thinks about the Second Amendment, he replies, “*Tight*. It’s like this accidental loophole for better or for worse. I mean, fascists all over Europe are stockpiling firearms constantly and they’re doing it with, like, the permission and understanding of the police. At least here there is an open economy where people can buy them.”

Echoing prior responses, William (JBGC: 1390238) adds that the Second Amendment is “important as a means to an end. I think it’s important that the working class be able to arm themselves, and while I don’t support the idea of a national militia, I’m glad the awful old bastards who wrote the amendment worded it in such a way that it nominally allows any American to own a gun. I believe the right to self-defense is natural and inherent in all living things, but it’s nice to have something that can be cited in a court, especially since the state is so powerful.”

The only hesitation in leftist and community defense group responses to Second Amendment questions arose from concerns over being equated with right-wing groups. As Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) explains, the Second Amendment is “important, but it’s also very vague. I like what it stands for, but the people who simp for it are typically far-right bootlickers. That’s why leftist gun culture is relatively quiet and reserved. We don’t want to be associated with the 2A [Second Amendment] or III% types.”²⁰⁶

Participants’ observations that the right approaches the Second Amendment with a nationalistic tone not present on the left is captured in my own interview evidence. Brian (III%/KSM Recruit: 4831771), who wants to enlist in a Kentucky militia but does not have enough financial flexibility to join, says he is excited to be part of a militia because “I want to be able to defend myself and use my civil liberties, and I want to be with people who I know will defend my liberties and stand up in emergencies . . . it is important that people stand up and defend civil liberties.”

Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) similarly relates his firearms ownership to an exercise of civil rights when I ask what the Second Amendment means to him: “it is a

²⁰⁶ Question: What does the Second Amendment mean to you? Is it important?

God-given right protected by our Constitution; that is why we still have a semblance of freedom. I exercise the right and become more responsible by training, and although I know most other gun owners do not do that, it is still their right.”

In discussing why he joined his militia, David (KDLM:1342898) equates legal rights to self-defense with ‘increased’ freedom: “When I came to Kentucky, one reason why I came here was because of the liberties that the Commonwealth of Kentucky offers citizens . . . the majority of our rights under the Bill of Rights of the Commonwealth talk about defense or talk about being able to defend yourself. So, the liberties that the commonwealth of Kentucky has are far more strong than a lot of other states, so that’s one of the reasons I came here.”²⁰⁷

While acknowledging that legally requiring minimum training for gun ownership might lead to a “safe environment,” David (KDLM: 1342898) tells me that “from a law or a statute standpoint, you know, it’s very clear constitutionally: shall not be infringed. So that means don’t regulate how I purchase it, who I purchase it from, what I pay for it, how I supply it with ammunition—you don’t regulate, you know, how I am trained . . . Constitutionally I feel there shouldn’t be a requirement for anything . . . I don’t see how the government could or should regulate training or regulate prerequisite qualifications for someone to own a weapon.”²⁰⁸

Participant discourse in militia groups also discusses the Second Amendment as the right that secures all others by ensuring freedom from government abuse. As Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) summarizes, “the First Amendment and the Second Amendment go hand in hand. You can’t have one without the other. And the Second Amendment stops tyrannical governments—tyrannical people—from taking the rights away from those who otherwise would have them.” David (KDLM:1342898) similarly explains that “without the Second Amendment the other rights would easily be taken away from us, so obviously the Second Amendment is the second amendment after the First, but it is, in my opinion, the most important amendment that needs to be upheld and continue to strengthen.”

Taken to extreme ends, the right to arm against potential government tyranny is perceived as granting citizens the right to access the same weapons as government

²⁰⁷ The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Kentucky (1891), §1 of the Bill of Rights includes: “The right to bear arms in defense of themselves and of the State, subject to the power of the General Assembly to enact laws to prevent persons from carrying concealed weapons.” §219-223 of the state Constitution concern the militia.

²⁰⁸ Question: Should there be any restrictions on gun ownership?

forces. Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) reasons that the Second Amendment “says that we should have the same firearms as our military, all right? Which means, yes, I *should* be able to own an assault rifle. I *should* be able to *own* a rocket launcher. I should be able to own a tank. But, c’mon, really? Can you imagine that? [laughs] . . . the people have given up *a lot* already from what the Constitution says that we are allowed to have.”

David (KDLM:1342898) explains gun rights similarly, concluding, “I’m not an anarchist or anything, but if someone thought they needed an explosive device, then they should be able to have that. Our laws don’t allow us to have that, and I’m not advocating that, and I don’t have that, but constitutionally we should be able to have anything and everything that we choose or feel necessary to protect ourselves, our family, and our community.”²⁰⁹

Rather than a discourse concentrated in militia accounts, SRA member Jacob (3309261) also tells me that the Second Amendment:

. . . [can be viewed] through a leftist lens. I still think it is applicable that your average citizen should have access to a means to defend themselves from people, critters, and also the potential threat of tyrannical governments, or something to that effect . . . I don’t see why I shouldn’t be allowed to, if I can afford one, own a tank—a fully functioning tank. You can buy a tank where they have to be disabled so the cannon doesn’t work—bullshit [laughs]. If you are going to really hang onto the Second Amendment, I ought to be able to have access—if I can afford them—to the same armaments that government has.

Jacob (WI SRA: 3309261) similarly thinks that the Second Amendment is different for “the far-right types, the 2A folks online—because that’s their whole identity.”

Confirming this, militia participants were the only individuals in my sample who described gun rights with nationalistic references. Robert (ODF:1793091) links the right to private firearms and his own militia training with myths of the American rifleman in the Revolutionary War: “I’ve got a gun, you’ve got a gun, he’s got a gun, let’s head to New York and start some shit. That was the constitutional—well, Continental Army it was called. Just a numbnut like me fighting with squirrel guns against muskets . . . What if a state says we’re going to go annex your property? If you have a gun you won’t just get rolled over by the army.”

In discussing state gun control measures, Josh (WV Militia:1768333) similarly references the American Revolution alongside armed citizenry narratives: “Having guns

²⁰⁹ Question: Do you think it is important to own guns?

is our founding thing . . . Northam [then Governor of Virginia] is not going to come here and take my guns; and he's not going to take a lot of guns in Virginia. They are going to fight him. And that's why we have guns—from tyrannical governments. Old King George wished he had never started any crap, I can tell you that.”²¹⁰ Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) discusses how he considered attending a protest against gun control measures in Richmond, Virginia in January 2020.²¹¹ Josh is a retired law enforcement officer, but describes state police negatively: “the state police got everybody out of the building as they were protesting . . . if I were there, I would have just said, ‘Hey, you! You traitors to the Constitution: you’ve got your back to the wrong side . . . because the Constitution says we should have those firearms.’”

Closely connected with nationally-framed concerns around government disarming citizens are beliefs that armed citizenries defend against foreign invasion. When I ask Matthew (East KY Militia: 4359402) what could happen if guns are restricted further, he replies, “behind every blade of grass in America is a rifle—and every country in the world knows this. It’s part of the reason why America has never been invaded . . . How can you sit and believe that the country has got your best interest in mind by taking away a form of protection that you have?”²¹²

Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) concurs: “America so far, for over two hundred years has maintained due to our Second Amendment . . . even in Japan they said, ‘We cannot attack America . . . There is a gun behind every blade of grass.’ And that is more true today than it was then. So that has stopped our country from being invaded by all these other foreign powers. You think that Russia wants to come over here? China wants to come over here? No, because they know the resources that it would take to invade America.”²¹³ David (KDLM: 1342898) similarly shares that, “if you look at writings from Stalin, or the writings from any communist leader, or any other socialist leaders in

²¹⁰ Question: Do you remember how old you were when you first shot a gun?

²¹¹ The January 2020 protests against proposed state gun control measures, including a version of a ‘red flag’ law and a floated assault weapons ban, drew around 22,000 gun rights supporters to Richmond, Virginia (cf. Williams et al. 2020; Schneider et al. 2020).

²¹² The opening phrase in Matthews’s answer references a popularly misappropriated quotation reinforcing the belief that an armed populace deterred Japanese invasion of the US during World War II: “They frequently quote Japan’s Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto as saying: ‘You cannot invade mainland United States. There would be a rifle behind each blade of grass.’ But this quotation is unsubstantiated and almost certainly bogus, even though it has been repeated thousands of times in various Internet postings” (Jackson 2009). Question: What do you think about the Second Amendment? Is it important?

²¹³ Question: Do you think the Second Amendment is important?

the world and in world history, you'll see that that's just one act of control over the populace. And the ability to have weapons is one way for us to end tyranny.”²¹⁴

If we strip away the more nationalistic framings of the accounts above, the heart of the issue around individual gun rights and private self-defense is, as community defense group member Paul (JPFO: 4489478) elaborates, that:

Power can be best expressed very often when you take it to extremes: out of the barrel of a gun. If he's got a gun and I haven't, I can't really argue because he's got all the cards. Which is probably why the firearm has always been called the great leveler. Plus, the other old favorite expression: ‘an armed society is a polite society.’ In as much as, if everybody is armed, then if somebody decides to create trouble they could well get it back in their face.

In short, participants from militias and, perhaps surprisingly, leftist and community defense groups, all embraced the need for private arms as a necessary means to counteract the concentration of government power. On the left, participants sometimes explicitly elaborated how their armed group ‘rightfully’ challenged the state’s Weberian monopoly on force and checked government violence against citizens. As I argue in the next chapter, these individualized understandings of how private violence should (and should not) be regulated by government intertwine with tangible sentiments that political elites and government cannot be trusted to effectively or equitably provide internal security or social welfare. As discussed in prior chapters, these beliefs appear in the context of tangible socioeconomic divides, as well as the presence of growing outgroup animosity and targeted violence against perceived social others. For the participants in this research, an individual responsibility for community defense is needed because other citizens have a right to arm in ways that government normatively should not control, and therefore cannot pragmatically police against.

Conclusion

In this chapter I analyzed armed group mission statements and rhetoric alongside data from semi-structured interviews for the presence of belief-oriented worldviews argued to constrain, enable, or motivate armed action in prior comparative politics literature. First, I assessed participant and group discourse for evidence of stated

²¹⁴ Question: Why do you think some people might be in favor of stricter gun control?

motivations and worldviews tied to religion. I did not find much discursive evidence that religious beliefs influenced group goals or participant motivations in this sample.

Second, I evaluated group and participant discourse for the presence of conspiracist beliefs. While conspiratorial rhetoric appeared in a minority of groups and participants on the right, conspiracy in these accounts was neither heavily referenced, nor related to actors' stated motivations for membership. Notably, the relative absence of religious and conspiracist frames within my defensive, nonviolent sample of groups does not rule out the possibility that these beliefs may help explain more politically violent actors.

Third, I discussed participants' partisanship and political beliefs, as well as how leftist armed groups and militias adapted their rhetoric and behavior in response to socialist and localist beliefs, respectively. Political beliefs help explain the structure, goals, and activities of armed groups, but appears less important in actors' stated motivations for membership.

As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 3, my sample overrepresents militia group leaders (as opposed to 'rank-and-file' recruits). Some scholarship on right-wing political action in particular suggests that activists and leaders are more likely to be driven by 'ideological' motives and remain committed to causes across time (cf. Dobratz 1997, 26; Mueller 2018, 13-14; Stern 1997, 119). Given this observation in prior studies, it is worth underscoring that participants in my sample do not claim to have joined groups to enact political goals or beliefs, and do not seem to view their current membership in terms of programmatic agendas.

In the last section I observe how all participants and groups share a belief that the private provision of community defense operates as a necessary check on government's concentration of force. In this worldview, armed defense is not only pragmatically necessary, but also civic and even 'patriotic.' Armed citizenry narratives are filtered through political preferences for beliefs such as libertarian localism and socialism, however, formal political beliefs need not exist to drive armed mobilization. As illustrated in the accounts of community defense group members, discourse related to traditional political divides does not appear to be a necessary component of armed action in this research.

To summarize, in this chapter, previously identified beliefs are observed to operate as enabling beliefs for micro-level action. Participants are quick to cite political beliefs in demonstrating the importance of their armed groups, but do not reference political ideologies as frequently when discussing their own reasons for membership. Many

Americans share political beliefs similar to the actors in this research without joining armed groups, or even purchasing firearms (e.g., Tom, Sovereign Citizen: 1758297). This chapter elaborated the worldviews and stated motivations of a sample of armed actors in part to help unpack how contemporary neoliberal understandings of individual responsibility may help individuals perceive private arms training as a public good. As discussed in the next chapter, how participants come to view armed defense and arms training as an altruistic act of community service is a puzzle that also requires considering the role of political and social trust.

6. Political Trust and Armed Mobilization as Public Service

Introduction

In the last chapter I discussed how beliefs in an individual responsibility for defense appeared across armed group rhetoric and participant accounts. Perceptions of an individualized responsibility for public safety, as David Garland (1996, 1997) and others argue, in part reflects sociopolitical norms that emerged from neoliberal political discourses of self-reliance and individualism. Beginning in the late 1960s, policymakers and political elites increasingly emphasized internal violence as the fault of criminal actors, rather than as the result of social disparities and structural inequalities government can systemically address. While connected to gun rights and Second Amendment frames, in this chapter I show how participants' rhetorical embrace of individual responsibility for defense is intertwined with more pragmatic distrust of government's ability to effectively provide internal security.

In this chapter I ask how my participants perceive government, and if these perceptions help explain their stated motivations for armed mobilization. In contrast to arguments around economic grievances and social resentment discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, participant responses in this chapter are analyzed for actors' perceptions of 'unjust' or 'undemocratic' power distributions. In short, this chapter focuses on participants' views of government inefficacy and elite failure, rather than perceptions of intergroup competition. As I illustrate, this does not mean to imply that previously discussed socioeconomic perceptions are unrelated to the sentiments of distrust and views chronicled here. Actors' experiences and positionalities inevitably influence their perceptions and worldviews, even when such beliefs may appear 'neatly' separated at higher levels of analysis.

I find participants and armed groups in this research consistently and heavily reference political distrust as a motivation for action. Rather than identifying economic, social, or policy grievances, all actors related their defensive engagement to threats rooting from the inability—or unwillingness—of government to protect communities. In my interviews, participants vocalized concrete grievances of state failings that fed into consistent distrust of government, political elites, and policymaking processes. Distrust of government efficacy—rather than the political system or democracy writ large—thus appears to offer a potential pathway to armed mobilization that cuts across

and feeds into the economic precarity, social resentment, and political belief enablers discussed in prior chapters.

In this chapter I unpack why political trust arguments are important for understanding defensive mobilization around firearms. I first review participant responses to questions about elite political trust. All participants reported distrust of political elites, and most participants perceived politicians and policymaking processes as corrupted by corporate or personal interests, especially at the national level.

Second, I provide descriptive information about participants' political engagement levels. Do low levels of political trust mean armed group members in this research are disengaged from traditional channels of political participation? I find the opposite: my participants are highly active in constituent lobbying and protests. Unlike some hyper-partisanship explanations might predict, however, these activists do not feel political parties are an effective avenue for change (see also Chapter 5).

In the third section I provide participant accounts of armed mobilization as a response to perceived threats from government's inability to protect and provide for communities. Prior research suggests political distrust contributes to sentiments that government is no longer an equitable, beneficial, or efficient distributor of social resources (cf. Hetherington 2005; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Jiobu and Curry 2001). In my research, political distrust is related to perceptions that government is also not an equitable, beneficial, or efficient organizer of internal security. This appears in participants' widely held views of ineffective and corrupt policing, pessimism about social service provision, and beliefs that increasing government power will only lead to further inefficiencies, harm, and abuse. Political distrust in these accounts intertwines with social distrust. Participants emphasize the need to provide protection not just from stochastic criminal violence, but also from potential violence by other organized groups.

Finally, I discuss how participants' sentiments of political distrust offer an emotive pathway for viewing armed defense as an essential and meaningful service for communities. By recognizing government's failure to provide security and basic welfare in calm or crisis, participants are able to perceive armed defense as a necessary and public good for the communities they serve. Understanding how actors view armed defense as an act of service illuminates why participants were motivated to join armed groups, as well as why these actors find their membership meaningful.

I. Political Trust

To assess political trust levels among my participants, I first asked whether individuals trust national, state, or local politicians. Questions here sought to capture distrust as both perceived systemic bias in decision-making processes, as well as beliefs that political elites use public funds for personal profit (i.e., corruption). Attitudes measured here are distinguished from political critiques of how the state—rather than its actors—regulates national wealth (Chapter 5). I also separate political distrust from the belief that certain social groups are favored in policymaking processes. While related to social resentment arguments, the distrust captured in this chapter portrays political failures as a result of systemic corruption and inefficiency, rather than temporary bias or competition between groups for public goods.

All participants shared perceptions of a broken political process, endemic corruption, and heightened societal tensions. Out of 29 interviews, no participant reported trust in national politicians, and only two participants (7%; one left and one community defense) expressed any degree of trust at the national level. Participants were more likely to trust state and local politicians, but trust levels remained low: 54 percent (15/28) of my sample reported no trust; 14 percent (4/28) expressed some trust; and only 25 percent (7/28) said they trusted local or state politicians. Reported distrust in my sample is high compared to national polling. In September 2021, for instance, Gallup reported 44 percent of Americans trusted politicians, compared to 25 percent of my sample.²¹⁵ The 44 percent Gallup recorded for 2021 was a near record low in political trust levels since polling began in 1972, reflecting a steady decline in public trust since the 1970s (McCarthy 2021).

As Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) tells me, “I do not trust national politicians and most politicians at other levels. There is no real practical difference. There are too few other instances in which I do trust the politician that it is not worth mentioning.” Liberal Gun Club member James (3469228) similarly replies that, “desire and vision to get elected tends to corrupt people. I think their focus changes from helping people to getting re-elected . . . so many of them have been caught in demonstrable lies.”

²¹⁵ Gallup Question: “How much trust and confidence do you have in general in men and women in political life in this country who hold or are running for public office—a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?” ‘Not very much’ and ‘none at all’ responses are aggregated for rates of distrust, and vice versa. As participant accounts in this chapter illustrate, individuals in my sample who expressed ‘some trust’ are best categorized as ‘not very much,’ rather than ‘a fair amount.’ Even if I generously record the 14 percent above as ‘trusting,’ such accounting does not change overall conclusions.

More militia members (40%, 4/10) and community defense group members (60%, 3/5) trusted local officials than members of leftist groups (23%, 3/13). When I asked participants why local politicians are more trustworthy, responses emphasized how these officials were more likely to respond to constituents, and less likely to be able to abuse power. As Pink Pistols member Michael (LA PP: 1140182) summarizes, “I don’t trust any politicians, though I distrust national politicians more than state politicians. Power corrupts, and the more power, the more corrupt. The more local politicians are—at least, they are more accessible and accountable.”

On the left, Alex (JBGC: 4770945), who lives in a more politically progressive part of the US, replies that they do not “trust any national politicians, and very few local. They are definitely different. Local politicians sometimes have the people’s best interests at heart, but the more effective they are, the harder it is to gain power in government. I’ve worked with a couple local politicians on various mutual aid projects and they really wanted to do the work, and I loved getting to know them and their visions.” Fellow JBGC chapter member William (JBGC: 1390238) similarly tells me, “local politicians can sometimes be pushed to follow the wishes of their constituents, but it’s not consistent. National politicians all work for the same rich people at a greater or lesser remove.” Steven (GA SRA: 4907149) replies that “local government seems ok; they seem to be rational, sane people. At the state level there are some very scary racist and incompetent people in charge (e.g., recent voter suppression laws).”²¹⁶

Militia member Ken (PA LFM: 1806143) says that, “so far, the local government has been supportive of people. It’s a rural county—that’s where they come from. They haven’t been corrupted yet, if they were going to be corrupted.” Local government, Ken notes, “works very hard to help out each other and not impose restrictions on rights. The state, however, they are a whole different story.” Ken (PA LFM: 1806143) thinks his community is doing “much worse” due to state lockdown policies that forced local businesses to close during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given the potential effect of the pandemic on trust levels, I also asked participants whether their opinion of government changed during the Covid-19 crisis. While Ken’s current distrust of state politicians relates to public health policies, most participants felt their experiences during the pandemic only confirmed existing views. William (JBGC:

²¹⁶ Question: Do your local and state governments do a good job? Where does government help or let down your community the most?

1390238) says his opinion of government has not really changed during the pandemic, “but my opinion of capitalist government was pretty low to begin with! Any government under capitalism is just a system of legitimizing violence by the rich against the working class and poor.” Will tells me that “our empty suit of a governor has decided, along with most governors, that the pandemic is over because business owners want their workers to go die for the bottom line.”

SRA member Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) similarly replies, “No. I am not surprised how the state responded . . . the actions, and inactions, of the state during the pandemic are what is to be expected by the protectors of capitalism. If the state did not have competing interests (i.e., protecting the wealth of capitalists versus the health and well-being of its citizens), we would have seen an entirely different response.” Brandon (FL Left: 1894948) says that he “lost further hope,” and Alex (JBGC: 4770945) responds, “yes, I hate them even more now, specifically because it’s so hard to watch over 700,000 Americans die while we reopen stores and do away with mask mandates.”

Militia member Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) also feels that his opinion of politicians was only confirmed by the pandemic, but instead because of government decisions to implement public health measures: “I realized most in government had leanings toward being tyrants; it is now simply more obvious. This is true of both Republicans and Democrats.” Michael (1140182), a member of the Louisiana Pink Pistols, similarly tells me that, “my personal opinion has been very low for a very long time, and the government—one, grabbing as much power as possible during a crisis and, two, spending more than we can afford—is all within my expectations.”

When asked about political trust, participant responses consistently described an endemically corrupt, ‘normless,’ and unresponsive political process. Although I did not directly ask about corruption, 82 percent (23/28) of participants independently raised the issue of political profiteering. All leftist members, 80 percent of militia members, and 40 percent of community defense group participants identified political corruption during their interviews.

When I ask socialist group member Jeff (2867389) whether he trusts state politicians, he surmises, “the Republicans are cartoonishly corrupt, but the Democrats are just, like, constantly engaged in small, medium to large, low-key corruption [laughs] . . . It’s just really interesting reading excerpts of, like, the *Afghanistan Papers* when they’re like, yeah, it’s one thing if there is just a little bit of corruption to get something done, but if it becomes like a wholesale kleptocracy, you really can’t do anything about

that. And I was like, oh, I know this [laughs].” Wisconsin SRA member Jacob (3309261) tells me he has “been of the opinion for a couple of years now that it is good to vote for harm reduction, but our current system as it stands—e.g., first-past-the-post for president and most elections, all the way down to the fact that lobbying is legal—you can just bribe your way into financial security as both a company or a legislator; a lot of them when they retire from writing laws become lobbyists, and then get paid more.”

Among community defense group members, Michael (LA PP: 1140182) similarly says that “both the state and federal government spend incredible amounts of money on so many things that the populace doesn’t really want, and people still hardly get the things they actually do want. Special interest groups get huge breaks while ordinary citizens foot the bill. The national debt is clearly unsustainable and we continue to spend massive amounts of money on things most people seem to agree should be cut back, such as military and defense spending.” National African American Gun Club member Nicole (2979846) responds even more directly: “the government won’t save us. We have to make the changes we want to see. I have worked with national politicians on various issues. Most of them are crooks.”

Many militia members also independently connected political offices with avenues for profiteering. David (KDLM: 1342898) replies, “I do not think that politicians have any concern with what the people want. I think that they put up a good front that they do—and don’t get me wrong, I think there are some that do—but the majority I would say are there because they enjoy the power, enjoy the money.”²¹⁷ David further explains, “I’m all for capitalism. I think that people should have the right to set prices and to do the things that they wish to do, as long as they are, you know—they have scruples and they have morals when they are conducting business . . . I can tell you that big corporations have a lot more power than the little small businesses.”

Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) shares David’s view: “I think [lobbyists] should all be outlawed. I think they should all be abolished. I think that lobbying should be done by the people themselves writing letters or calling the congressmen or senators, not *big money* sending professional lobbyists. And what is a professional lobbyist? Somebody who carries a check . . . It’s not what the people want.”²¹⁸ Josh goes on to tell me, “number one, I don’t think that any state or the federal government . . . needs

²¹⁷ Question: Do politicians pay attention to what people think when they make decisions?

²¹⁸ Questions: How politically active are you? Do you tend to vote in every election? Have you ever lobbied your congressional office (e.g., written a letter, called an office, etc.)?

incumbents, or those who are in there for any length of time other than maybe eight years . . . it's not to become a millionaire. Right now, in West Virginia the last . . . two governors that they've had have been multimillionaires, and the median income for West Virginians is somewhere around \$30-\$40,000. All right, what does that person know about what West Virginians need?"²¹⁹

East Kentucky Militia member Matt (4359402) is similarly cynical: "I haven't met one political figure that is actually, genuinely set out for anyone other than themselves or a higher plan. So, I mean, yeah, they got to make us feel like they are helping us to get into the position that they want to be in, but, at the end of it, nothing ever comes of it, and they are all just going for the money." As Hunter (TSM: 3354245) explains, "most politicians use government and media as a means to personal enrichment, rather than to serve their constituents. It is a dangerous, selfish endeavor that relies on fear, promises, and lies to remain in power. I know that most politicians don't start this way, but they become corrupted over time."

In short, participant responses across armed groups in this sample demonstrated consistently high perceptions of distrust toward political elites. Rather than low trust levels leading to political disengagement among participants, however, the individuals I spoke with felt compelled to help communities harmed by government failures and corruption.

II. Political Engagement

To see how low trust levels might influence participants' political behavior, I next asked questions about voting, constituent lobbying habits (e.g., calling or writing congressional representatives), and protest attendance. Two participants had run or investigated running for public office (one right, one community defense), 62 percent (16, n=26) had participated in a protest in the past five years (11 left, 2 right, 3 community defense), 81 percent (21, n=26) had contacted a representative, one had testified before state legislature, one worked for local government, and all 29

²¹⁹ The Governor of West Virginia in 2022, Jim Justice, "had an estimated net worth of \$1.1 billion" in 2011; a fortune which has declined (Helman 2021). Jim Justice is also accused of tax evasion and dodging millions of dollars of state fines (Helman 2019). Former Governor Joe Manchin (2005-2010) was estimated to be worth around \$7.6 million in 2018 (OpenSecrets n.d.). The 2019-2020 mean income for males in West Virginia was \$45,380 (BLS 2020B). Interview questions: What do you think about your state and local government? Do they do a good job? Where does government let down communities the most in WV, and where does it help communities the most?

participants reported regularly voting (though this is of course subject to desirability bias).

Despite reporting high levels of political engagement, participants also expressed pessimistic assessments of the future of the US, as well as the ability to affect change through voting. As participants consistently described a highly corrupt political process, it is unsurprising that these individuals sought avenues for change outside traditional constituent lobbying, such as protesting and community organizing. While many members of armed groups described themselves as active demonstrators, participants in this research reported that their organizations usually did not participate in protests. Where armed groups did appear at demonstrations, these groups indicated that they attended to offer armed security for other protestors, rather than to protest as an armed group. However, the line between members protesting as individuals versus as a group can be fine. While an important question, the data collected for this research is not suited for an investigation of such distinctions.

In the following section, I first review participant accounts of contacting representatives and senses of efficacy around political engagement. Do participants feel that voting or traditional constituent lobbying makes a difference? Relatedly, do participants feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the country? Second, I evaluate participants' accounts of protest engagement.

Participants' Assessments of Political Efficacy

Among the 21 individuals who had contacted a representative (11/12 left; 6/9 right, and 4/5 community defense), I further asked whether they received a response. Unsurprisingly, participants largely reported that they received no response when contacting representatives: “usually you leave a message because there’s so many people calling on hot topics . . . That’s usually the end of it. At least, that has been my experience” (David, KDLM: 1342898). Ken (PA LFM: 1806143) tells me that for the most part “they really don’t respond . . . But sometimes I do get responses. I have written to a state representative and explained I had a problem. He was very receptive to my concerns.” Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) says, “I have called and emailed senators and governors in the past regarding many issues and am typically met with a very vague and possibly automated response. The voicing of public opinion seems to be quite ineffective in my experience unless there is some sort of action connected with it.”

As already suggested by participant responses to questions about elite political trust, many individuals in my sample perceived voting as generally ineffective. When I ask William (JBGC: 1390238) if he votes, he responds, “I usually vote on election day so I can vote on local issues, but I’m pretty cynical about the possibility of enacting change through electoralism at anything beyond the local level.” Steven (GA SRA: 4907149) says that he does not “trust the bicameral political process . . . The past four years has shown how it can fail and devolve into tribalism. That being said, governmental institutions survived the Trump era, so they seem somewhat resilient.”

Militia member Rob (ODF: 1793091) similarly feels that voting tends to be ineffective. Rob tells me, for instance, that “Chicago has a mass shooting every weekend, but the Democrats are in charge and the government won’t do shit because they really don’t care because the voting bloc there is secure.” Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) also feels that “policy, it’s usually a good ol’ boys system of policies, and it always has been . . . where if you’re not in it, you don’t get to make policy. I don’t care what your constituents want, it’s what *we* want and what *we* think is good for you . . . I don’t get a vote.” Despite this, Josh mentions in our conversation that he considered running for town mayor.

Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463), who is a self-described Marxist anarchist, clearly indicates at multiple points that government “is effective from the perspective of protecting and supporting the interests of the capitalist class. It is doing exactly what it was designed to do.” He tells me, “I do vote in all elections, however, I do not believe that electoralism is effective or that it will result in substantial change. My belief is that the government and the capitalist class that control it will not give you the means or opportunities to lessen its power.”

I also asked whether individuals thought the US was heading in the right direction. Out of 28 responses, 82 percent felt it was heading in the wrong direction. Only three participants were optimistic (all community defense group members), and two said there were some good and bad things ahead (both militia members). All leftist members and 80 percent of militia participants expressed purely pessimistic views. Alex’s (JBGC: 4770945) answer summarizes many views on the left: “No. I think the US is doing a good job of looking more progressive while maintaining the status quo.” Among the mixed responses, militia member David (KDLM: 1342898) tells me, “we are doing good as far as getting people to understand that the only way to change things is to get

involved and to be heard. You know, not accepting everything that is told to you and voicing your opinion is important. I think we're seeing that on both sides of the fence."

Overall, pessimism with the future of the US, and a general sense that political parties, elites, and traditional voting are ineffective or corrupted appears across armed group member discourse in this sample. Broadly, participants appear to demonstrate stronger perceptions of corruption than the US electorate. Similarly, armed group members in this research matched or exceeded rates of sociopolitical pessimism recorded in the US population. For instance, nationwide polling conducted between January and November 2021 reported that between 56 and 73 percent of registered voters felt the nation was 'on the wrong track,' with the latter percentage representing a record high (NBC News 2022).²²⁰ This is compared to at least 82 percent of my own sample. Rather than alienating my participants, however, higher levels of pessimism and elite distrust seemed to manifest in more direct forms of political action

Protest Participation

To understand how actors engage in other non-traditional forms of political action, I asked whether individuals had taken part in a protest, and if they would share examples. Sixty-two percent (16, n=26) of participants reported that they had participated in a protest, almost all within the past three years (2018-2021).²²¹ Leftists (92%, 11/12) and community defense groups (75%, 3/4) reported higher rates of protest participation than militia members (20%, 2/10). While national numbers on the percentage of the population that engaged in protests during this period was unavailable, between May 24 and August 22, 2020 over 10,600 demonstrations occurred across the US, most of which were spurred by the murder of George Floyd on May 25 by Minneapolis Police officers (Kishi and Jones 2020).

Responses in this section are anonymized given security concerns. For instance, one SRA member tells me they are "not willing to go into much detail, but I have friends being held in jail right now on a one million dollar bond simply for being present at protests where other people had ideas for more 'direct action' protest methods. I would

²²⁰ NBC News survey question: "Now, all in all, do you think things in the nation are generally headed in the right direction, or do you feel things are off on the wrong track?"

²²¹ N=26, one leftist group member, one militia recruit, and one community defense group member did not respond to this question.

say more, but I'm a little on edge about that stuff lately because of my friends getting snatched for things they didn't do."

Another SRA member tells me that, "above and beyond assisting in the BLM protests over the summer, I have also been involved with disruptions, such as sit-ins and speak-outs. I have also been a key organizer in protests." A JBGC member shares that they attend "as many [protests] as possible. Most recently, I did vehicle support for a march that was in protest of cops beating three teenagers almost to death for no reason. I do vehicle support a lot because my car is big and tough enough in case I need to block a car trying to run over the protestors." Another JBGC member tells me that they:

... have been attending protests off and on since my mid to late twenties. The protest that probably caused me to join an armed community defense organization was memorable. In this instance, armed right-wingers attached to a Patriot Prayer event surrounded and threatened myself and a small group of my friends after we got separated from the larger anti-fascist group. I was the one who had pushed for my group of friends to attend this counter-protest, and I felt responsible for endangering them. The presence of a small number of JBGC members, also armed, facilitated our exit from a dangerous situation. I felt—and feel—an obligation to resist and deter right-wing street actions in order to help other anti-fascist activists stay safe and carry out their work.

John Brown Gun Club members say that their groups actively provide security at protests. One member tells me that "the group I organize with has been all—or a part of—the logistics, intel, marshalling, and physical security team for a number of protests and events in our state and several other states . . . Most of them have been memorable in one way or another! We recently helped with marshalling and logistics for a protest march against several local police departments over their brutality and their harassment of the families of some of their victims."

In contrast, when I ask Brandon (FL Left: 1894948) about his group's encounters with what he calls 'fascist militias,' he tells me that "some of [our] groups have encountered members of the [fascist] groups at ranges or at protests. We keep to ourselves when possible—best not to draw attention, especially when we have members of our groups that are already targeted because of their demographics." Similarly, the SRA states on its 'About' page that, "While the organization and its chapters do at times sanction presence at protests, we forbid armed protests under the SRA banner, as this is not the goal of the SRA. We encourage members who wish to participate in armed demonstrations to investigate organizations that have been established for that

purpose.”²²² Pennsylvania SRA member Tyler (2911613) confirms this policy within his own chapter: “Even peacefully protesting under the SRA banner will get you the boot. We do not engage in any type of aggression.”

Most of the militia groups I spoke to also did not want their groups to officially engage in political demonstrations. Robert (ODF: 1793091) tells me that wearing Ohio Defense Force paraphernalia (e.g., patches) to political rallies is grounds for expulsion that is consistently enforced. The Virginia Oath Keepers (VAOK) similarly warns in its Code of Conduct that “any member who is engaged in activities that are outside of the Virginia Oath Keepers’ mission must not wear any VAOK logos or use any pamphlets, banners, stickers, web links or any other reference” (VAOK, document sent to author, August 21, 2021, see Appendix 4). Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) is also leery of engaging his group in overt political action: “you definitely got to have a strategy with that; it’s something you can’t just gung ho and jump into. And when the day comes, you know, we will address certain situations, but as of now, no, I have not addressed anything.”²²³

At least two militia members reported attending protests on their own. One account is documented in the next section (Josh, WV Militia). The other militia member, Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342), tells me that he participated in multiple protests during 2020 against government lockdowns and has attended “multiple Second Amendment rallies.” In short, similar to other scholarship on the Militia Movement, I found my participants to be politically engaged outside their armed group. Although it is subject to desirability bias, all participants reported voting in local, state, and general elections, and many recounted instances of writing, calling, or Tweeting government representatives. One participant on the right joked, “I would vote twice, but it is illegal” (Ken, Light Foot Militia: 1806143).

While political distrust clearly relates to my participants’ stated motivations for traditional forms of political action, can distrust help explain why actors here decided to join armed groups? In the next section I further unpack the contours of participant distrust for answers: are armed group members in this sample primarily distrusting only of political elites, or do individuals display similarly high levels of distrust in the

²²² See ‘FAQs’ on SRA “About” page, accessed December 8, 2020 at <https://socialistra.org/about/>.

²²³ Question: Have you ever voiced your opinion to government, for instance, writing letters, calling congressional offices, etc.?

institutions of government, such as law enforcement, courts, and social welfare agencies?

III. Institutional Trust

In this section I present evidence of participant distrust of law enforcement and government bureaucracies. First, I discuss participant views of law enforcement, justice systems, and emergency response measures. All participants shared a perception that government cannot remove private arms from ‘bad’ actors, and that government institutions will be unable to contain social unrest during exigencies. Distrust in government to effectively enforce order through state forces appears to be strongly related to a generalized distrust in policing. Participants’ distrust of policing was sometimes supported by negative, first-hand encounters with police. Tangible distrust in the capacity of police forces was also coupled with strong perceptions of systemic corruption and abuse in justice systems.

Second, I consider how participants relate systemic infrastructure failings in other areas of governance, such as the welfare state, to wider distrust of government’s capacity to regulate private violence. Participants’ views of systemic corruption were not just confined to elites, but also filtered through to evaluations of bureaucratic agencies and welfare institutions. Government failure in routine service provision encouraged perceptions that other government agencies would be similarly ineffective in crisis.

Overall, participants tied their views of government inefficacy and institutional corruption to their own stated motivations for armed action and group membership. More specifically, all participants shared concerns that government cannot protect against organized social violence. These specific concerns help explain why armed action in this research appears as a collective, rather than individual, response to distrust in government and politics. Importantly, however, accounts here also illustrate how the proliferation of private arms across the US contributes to the erosion of both political and social trust in feedback loops. That is, the prevalence of firearms in private hands further entrenches distrust of the state and others through the presence of private violence, which in turn encourages more individuals and existing gun owners to further invest in firearms and armed defense.

Perceptions of Policing Efficacy, Government Institutions, and Armed Others

Armed groups may have different ideas about what threats their communities face, but all participants shared a belief that police cannot effectively regulate or respond to internal violence. When I asked participants whether local and state police, law enforcement, and justice systems do a good job in their communities and state, 82 percent responded negatively, often stating a general distrust of policing (92 percent of leftist groups, 80 percent of community defense groups, and 70 percent of militias). Fourteen percent of participants reported trusting only local police (three militia members and one leftist member). Recognition of systemic bias and corruption in policing and justice systems appeared frequently and unprompted across participant accounts, just as in participant discussions of political corruption. On the left and in community defense groups, a history of abusive, biased, ineffective, and corrupt policing helped justify armed defense as both empowering and necessary for targeted communities. On the militia right, perceptions of corruption and ineffectiveness in policing similarly encouraged armed preparation against other ‘violent’ social groups, especially during exigencies.

For community defense group members in my sample, the need for self-defense to protect their communities was discursively supported by the long history of government oppression, disarmament of targeted groups, and hate group harassment. As Georgia Pink Pistols member Justin (4659213) tells me, “the queer in me knows that a firearm is a great tool for equalization of force, and there have been Western governments that round up gay people and do horrible things to them; and they round up other minorities and do horrible things to them—less so in the last 50 years, but it does happen. And if you consider Yugoslavia a Western government, it has happened in the last 50 years. And so, I like having access to that tool.” Justin goes on to explain that, “in Atlanta much of the metropolitan area is experiencing a major crime wave right now. Part of it is due to jobless rates, part of it is due to a lack of trust and faith in law enforcement.”

Georgia SRA member Steven (4907149) similarly responds that police and law enforcement “do a great job of harassing people of color, shooting them, arresting them, etc., perpetuating the prison industrial complex. Crime has gotten bad around Atlanta (not in my town, however) because the Atlanta Police Department are acting like spoiled brats ever since our movement has tried to hold them accountable. They are ‘afraid’ to do their jobs by protecting and serving.” Tyler (PA SRA: 2911613) says he thinks “it’s

a beautiful thing that people are standing up for equality and advocating for police accountability. Our nation has been built on racism and oppression, and we need to tear those things down.”²²⁴

When I ask JBGC member William (JBGC: 1390238) about restrictions on gun ownership, he shares, “I don’t trust the US criminal court system, but I do grudgingly agree that it’s probably for the best to bar anyone with a violent felony conviction or who has committed a domestic assault from owning a firearm. I wish the racist courts were not so inconsistent in convicting people, but they are the only tool we have right now. I don’t believe cops should carry guns on the job, and I’m not sure they should be allowed to own them on their own either.” Fellow chapter member Alex (JBGC: 4770945), when asked whether police do a good job, replies: “No, absolutely not. Fuck all cops.” Alex tells me that, “most recently I emailed our senators to ask them to reconsider their new strict gun control legislation. I outlined how it would harm our BIPOC community, and they replied that guns were too dangerous for it to matter what race the owner is—too bad cops don’t agree.” Leftist defense member Zach (3028541) summarizes, “the police are an occupying force with military grade equipment. It seems only fair that the community they occupy be armed as well.”

My first encounter with firearm owners’ suspicion of law enforcement came not from interviews on the left, but rather surprisingly from a booth at a Kentucky gun show on June 30, 2019. Alongside old army guides, preparedness books, and firearms manuals was *You & The Police!*, published by Boston T. Party. *You & The Police!* (2009) describes tactics for dealing with police interactions that many BIPOC communities might be familiar with, including keeping palms open, announcing movements, moving slowly, and using recording devices.

When I ask militia member Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) if state and local police do a good job, he replies, “Absolutely not! Law enforcement here and nationally has done nothing but arrest the wrong people over the past 18 months to 2 years. They are doing the bidding of the wrong people.” Drew (Watchmen: 2170513) replies simply, “No, productive penalty and enforcement of penalty is lacking.” Light Foot Militia member Ken (1806143) similarly tells me, “well, when it comes the justice system—I have seen this on a parking ticket—it puts money toward the court’s retirement system.

²²⁴ Question: How do you feel about ongoing nationwide protests following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others?

To me that is not cool; that starts the imagination. Not cool. It should be coming from the general budget, not taken from fines that they can impose. It's almost self-serving." Unsurprisingly, Ken says he believes "in a small central government. The government I believe has only bolstered gross incompetence. If you could ever make gross incompetence bigger, they have accomplished that."

Militia member and former law enforcement officer Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) similarly answers negatively in his assessment of policing:

Law enforcement is as different throughout this country as the governors and mayors of the towns that support them . . . now, supposedly the training is supposed to be the same, and it pretty much is . . . But when they go back to their individual police departments, that is where they either become corrupted or quit and go to another unit . . . Now, uh, law enforcement here in America is no longer, *per se*, to serve and protect. I don't believe that one little bit. Now, it does exist . . . but too many people are getting shot and killed here in America, which need not be. When I was in law enforcement we were taught that the crime has to escalate [to violence] . . . a lot of people, especially young people, if use your voice like a father did, usually that will snap them out of whatever they are in. You know? Command and control: a commanding voice—give them a command—and a lot of times that would just deescalate everything . . . These days all you 'gotta do is rattle something and they get shot . . . So, I mean, this is *ridiculous*. Cops are just pulling their guns and *shooting* people.²²⁵

Matthew (East KY Militia: 4359402) is an exception to participants' widely shared distrust of police, but even he caveats his trust: "You meet *a lot* of good cops. No matter where you go. That's about the purest people that you can get that is in the government position. That ain't saying you don't have bad cops, but nine times out of ten you meet a law enforcement officer, he isn't out just to lock you up or to get you in trouble."

For armed defense groups on both sides of the political spectrum, the ability to obtain firearms illegally despite government regulation led to repeated arguments that because bad actors are unlikely to follow laws, any government regulation of gun ownership only disarms citizens and communities in need of protection (cf. Kelly 2019; Kohn 2004, 77, 120; Rosenblum 2000, 293-295). When I ask Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) who should own a gun, he summarizes, "Everybody. I mean, you don't want 'em in the hands of criminals, obviously. That's one thing we can't control. We can't stop heroin from coming into America. How are you going to stop Andrew down here

²²⁵ Interview was conducted on March 13, 2020, well before the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 by Minneapolis Police officers.

from getting guns illegally? I mean, he can buy drugs, he can buy guns. And then once you try to take them away from the law-abiding citizens, you're not getting them away from the criminals."

Rather than primarily responding to the threat of criminal violence, however, participants more often expressed concerns about the inability of government to protect citizens from organized violence and other armed groups. SRA member Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) tells me more gun regulation could be harmful because "there's just so many fucking guns and they are in the hands of the worst people imaginable, and so creating a giant black market that is cornered by white nationalists is a terrible fucking idea."²²⁶ When I ask Taylor (MI SRA: 4958846) if there should be restrictions on gun ownership, they similarly tell me, "I would say fascists, Nazis, and their sympathizers shouldn't be allowed to own guns, and competency tests when buying a first firearm would be nice, but any restrictions passed will certainly be used to curtail the rights of marginalized peoples and leftists. They always have been in the past."

Three participants had personal encounters, or near encounters, with white supremacist or right-wing violence, and another participant had been the victim of an armed mugging. Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) faced multiple worldview shifting experiences that led him to join his socialist armed defense group, including attending the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia as a police liaison for Black Lives Matter counter-protestors. Jeff tells me:

I bought an AR-15 after Charlottesville—and that was just a function of realizing how well-armed the right was . . . the police had gotten a lot of negative attention for being very heavy-handed handling the last demonstration before the Unite the Right protest on August 12, and so they had basically decided that they were just not going to be involved at all, and so [Charlottesville] was just a gigantic, free-roaming street brawl . . . I ended up at the front of the march up Water Street . . . I watched that grey Dodge Charger—I watched him deliberate, you know? . . . the whole city was in a state of emergency so, like, if the police were doing their jobs, there shouldn't have been any cars down there *at all*, but the police were nowhere to be fucking found . . . and then he accelerated and then he hit—he, like, the car kicked into gear—he blew past me—he was like ten feet away from me. And then watching that carnage, um, and then having to regroup, find out—find the people I came with because I had become separated from them . . . and then doing all of this while, like, guys in III% patches with AR-15s watched this all happening, and realizing that those guys could just gun us down right now and we would have no recourse at all. Like, I knew the John Brown Gun

²²⁶ Question: Do you support any restrictions on gun ownership?

Club and Redneck Revolt folks were there, but I never saw them that day, because there just wasn't enough of them, frankly. But I heard that they did do good work. And then when the police finally did show up after James Fields pulled away—they showed up in an armored personnel carrier. And then the guy that came off the top had a weapon—had a crowd control weapon, like a rubber bullet launcher—and it was like, oh, he's—that's for *us*. Like, he doesn't have any lethal means on him, which would have made me feel much better because, like, *we didn't*, you know? So, the police's first response in that situation was to . . . contain *us* and, like, pull *our* medics off of Heather Heyer and the folks that were injured. So that is where I began to really, seriously start thinking about, like—there needs to be organized armed defense, and marginalized folks of all kinds in this country need to have safe spaces to train and practice. Because you don't just get good at shooting—you don't stay good at shooting, you have to shoot a lot.

Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) summarizes, “I just don’t think the government—I just don’t think the fabric of society is strong enough, so I want to be able to take and hold space for folks who, like, aren’t Nazis [laughs] to live. And I think the only way that will happen—there will have to be an armed component to that. [Because they are armed?] Yeah.”

Pink Pistols member Justin (GA PP: 4659213) agrees: “I think there is a risk of violence from extremists on both sides. I worry about it, especially as someone caught in the middle . . . I don’t think the US is equipped to handle 21st century problems in its current form . . . I think the model we designed for our country could handle it, but its current implementation is not well-equipped . . . for it to work well without us falling into authoritarianism. I am not optimistic.” Later on Justin tells me, “I am very happy to have the right to own a firearm. I see it as the last line of defense for myself and my family. If things are collapsing around me—non-random acts of violence, societal violence—I will keep it with me until I am on a plane leaving the country and then dump it on the air strip.”

When I ask if it is important to own guns, Pennsylvania SRA member Tyler (2911613) explains, “it’s important to me to own one because I’ve had a gun pulled on me before in the street. It’s an extremely helpless feeling and that situation made me want to be able to defend myself. I feel safer with a gun. It’s also important because I fear the US is becoming more and more divided by ideology. I fear Donald Trump will not peacefully leave office if he loses, and I expect mass civil unrest if he wins a second term. Regardless of the outcome of this election [2020 Presidential], I think it will be bad. ‘Shit’s gonna pop off,’ as they say. I’m prepared to defend myself and my comrades if an ideological war becomes a ground war.”

In leftist armed groups, the presence of right-wing violence heightened the urgency of arms training in group and participant rhetoric. On its homepage the Puget Sound JBGC says that they “organize against fascism” and “work to counter the rise of fascist and far-right groups and entities . . . That includes disrupting fascists and their structures to keep them from effectively organizing, and especially resisting fascists holding public events and maintaining a public presence.”

A SRA informational pamphlet reads: “We encourage our members to oppose fascism in all its forms, and we stand in solidarity with our comrades who engage in direct actions against fascist organization. However, we are not a militia and we do not condone our members engaging in violence on our behalf. We believe the best way for our organization to oppose fascism is through education, training, and community building.” In free resources offered on its webpage, the SRA offers five downloadable target practice images, including one of an armed KKK member (see Figure 6.1).



FIGURE 6.1. SRA target pack

Reprinted from “SRA Target Pack” on SRA website, accessed December 9, 2020 at <https://socialistra.org/resources/>.



FIGURE 6.2. SRA meme

Reprinted from SRA Reddit Page, accessed December 13, 2020 at https://www.reddit.com/r/SocialistRA/comments/ggu681/theyre_armed_are_you/.

In my interviews, participants on the left directly connected concerns about armed actors on the fascist and neo-Nazi right with their own reasons for joining armed

defense. For instance, when I ask Wisconsin SRA member Jacob (WI SRA: 330961) if he bought a gun during the pandemic, he tells me, “I did kind of have the thought—I think I saw a meme somewhere with some dudes in Klan hoods, and it said, ‘They are armed. Are you?’ And I said, that is a really fucking good point. Because like, I am, but am I?” (see Figure 6.2).²²⁷ Jacob’s fears of the armed right also root from a near violent encounter. In August 2020 Jacob was protesting against police brutality in Kenosha, Wisconsin, days before Kyle Rittenhouse opened fire on demonstrators, killing two.²²⁸ Jacob (WI SRA: 330961) tells me that “with the growing civil unrest and people’s unwillingness to communicate with people in their community, I am definitely of the belief that we’re creeping up on a civil war, just ever so slowly, and it’s not going great.” Zach (3028541), a member of a leftist defense group in Florida, similarly shares that he “purchased several firearms since the beginning of the pandemic. The reason for these purchases is the growing reality that regular sectarian violence is extremely likely in the near future.”

Arizona SRA member Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) feels that “the Second Amendment in the US is a tool for white supremacy. It is used by fascist and fascist sympathizers/adjacent groups to justify ownership of firearms for people like them, but then it is conveniently forgotten for folks they want to oppress.” This partly explains why Shawn finds participation in the SRA valuable. He tells me groups like the SRA are important because “the leftist community and other marginalized communities are underserved in terms of self and community defense . . . [the SRA] sees strength through unity, anti-oppression, and solidarity. The SRA fills the gap that has long been missing in leftist spaces, and that is why I believe it is important. The right no longer has a monopoly on firearms culture.”²²⁹

When I ask Alex (RIJBGC: 4770945) if they think it is important to own guns, Alex replies, “Yes, because the people who want to harm marginalized communities are armed. It’s important to at least understand how guns work and how to use them, even if you don’t want to own one (which is fine!).” Massachusetts Pink Pistol member Nick

²²⁷ Question: Have you purchased any firearms since the start of the pandemic?

²²⁸ August 2020 protests in Kenosha were responding to the local police shooting of Jacob Blake alongside other high-profile police killings of Black men and women nationwide.

²²⁹ A smaller note, but one that similarly shows solidarity with oppressed outgroups, is Shawn’s (AZ SRA: 2986463) apparent acknowledgement of Indigenous land when I ask where he lives and he replies, “in so-called Arizona.”

(MA PP: 2910720) similarly tells me that, alongside discrimination, the major issue facing the US is:

... an alarming rise of violent political rhetoric and extremism, mostly, but not exclusively, from the far-right. The January 6th insurrection was a prominent example, but white supremacist groups operate in the open even here in relatively progressive Massachusetts. It seems like people are becoming more loyal to their partisan affiliations than their country, and that the Overton window has shifted far enough that discussion of using violence to achieve political change is becoming accepted.

Or, as Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) summarizes during our interview: “there’s Nazis, and Nazis are bad, and Nazis have guns, and people that are not Nazis should have guns.”²³⁰

While leftist groups fear violence from the armed right, militia members such as Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) tell me they worry about ‘confrontations’ with leftist activists. When deciding whether to attend a gun rights protest in neighboring Virginia in January 2020, Josh says that he thought the protests would not “accomplish anything, except maybe getting people in trouble. I was one of the ones who thought that the left may do something because, you know, they may do something like was done at Charlottesville, that would make the right look bad, and I wasn’t going to go up there and have to fight my way out, you know?” While the inaccuracy of Josh’s characterizations of Charlottesville should need little note given Jeff’s detailed first-hand account presented earlier, the 2017 Unite the Right rally included a deliberate act of political violence by a known white supremacist, James Alex Fields Jr., who was sentenced to life in prison under federal hate crime charges for the vehicular murder of Heather Heyer, and injury of dozens of others (DOJ 2019).

The January 2020 protests Josh references against proposed state gun control measures, including a version of a ‘red flag’ law and a floated assault weapons ban, drew some 22,000 gun rights supporters to Richmond, Virginia.²³¹ Josh’s concerns

²³⁰ Statement occurred during a conversation about the size and scale of right-wing and neo-Nazi organizations in Kentucky.

²³¹ Broadly, ‘red flag’ laws are mechanisms that allow a judge to authorize the temporary seizure of an individual’s firearms after law enforcement, family members, or acquaintances report that an individual may be a harm to themselves or others. As of August 2019, at least 17 states had passed versions of ‘red flag’ laws, with much national debate about the role of due process in court-mandated seizures (cf. Williams 2019; Vasilogambros 2019). All of my participants expressed opposition to red flag laws, largely out of concern that these legal mechanisms were ripe for abuse. Socialist group member Jeff (KY Left:2867389) tells me, “I am *very* concerned with being somebody who has been publicly identified with, like, the hard-left in this country with the idea of red flag laws. And people think that I’m being

about confrontations with ‘leftists,’ however, did not come to fruition. Periodicals reported very few counter-protesters (cf. Schneider et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2020).²³²

When I ask Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) what he feels are the greatest problems threatening the US, he replies, “I don’t want to like, exaggerate, and I don’t want to give you the wrong impression, but we’re hanging on by a thread. I mean, we really are, though. And I mean, it’s kind of why I do what I do: it’s why I set this [militia] up, it’s why we’re who we are now. But hopefully it never comes to a day where we’re needed. But, I mean, it really is scary—and to think that you’re ‘gonna leave children here after.’”

Militia member David (KDLM:1342898) tells me he decided to join a militia because “I knew that if there was unrest, similar to Ferguson or similar to some of these other places . . . I knew that, as a person, as a family, I could not protect myself alone. So, I sought after militia service and I looked into them, obviously, where everybody else looks into everything today: through Facebook pages.”²³³ Filling gaps in police protection also motivated militia member Rob (ODF:1793091):

What militias do teach is how to handle things yourself. Law enforcement and community leaders won’t do anything about a gang of punk ass kids starting shit, and they don’t handle it. I had to handle these things myself . . . I said, let’s take turns and patrol the neighborhood, but people are too afraid, and the community does nothing. That’s the militia thing. How do you get community support? You get them together to shake hands with cops, but if you don’t rat on gangbangers or druggies in the neighborhood, then you’re part of the crime problem . . . Most militia people think like me. If you want to make things right, you start at home in your community. Help your neighbor if they’re in trouble. If you’re going to judge others, set your house in order first.

Robert (1793091) joined a section of the Ohio Defense Force after he began thinking about a large earthquake occurring in the New Madrid Seismic Zone. He explains his fears to me in a sequence of disaster scenarios that include mass unrest and

paranoid. But it’s like, no, communists have been institutionalized before. It would not be very difficult for someone to say, like, ‘this guy doesn’t think we should bomb Iran, he must be clearly fucking crazy.’ And like, take my firearms.” Militia member Rob (ODF:1793091) has the same concern: “[With] red flag laws some liberal could go in and just say, ‘he’s in a militia’—could go in and complain, ‘I fear for my life because he has a gun and all guns are dangerous’ . . . So now I ‘gotta get a lawyer . . . to get my rights back because I’m ‘mentally unstable’ when any progressive liberal would say I’m a hazard just for owning a gun. How do you prevent abuse and what are the repercussions for false accusations?”

²³² It is important to note that while suspicion of leftist activists was a dominant thread in many militia interviews, this was not consistent across all participants on the right. For instance, ODF member Robert (1793091) felt his group shared “around 80 percent” of the same beliefs as the local chapter of the leftist Redneck Revolt.

²³³ David is referring to protests in Ferguson, Missouri that began in August 2014 after the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown by officer Darren Wilson.

social lawlessness as government agencies become overwhelmed and lose internal control: “Assume a [magnitude] 6.5 or 7 earthquake hits the fault line: things are going to go down and there will be mass chaos. And what if it’s not just a localized earthquake, but one that reaches across several states and causes blackouts? How quickly, and what will the government do? If you look at disaster programs, what preparations do state, local, and federal governments have?” The answer for Rob was not enough. After contacting local police chiefs and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials, Rob says he was referred back to the same individuals he had already contacted, leading him to conclude:

Government officials know where they go—the FEMA plan takes care of them when things go bad. But for everyone else FEMA says, ‘you have to wait till it happens and we’ll tell you where to go’ . . . That is what got me in a militia. I don’t want to face the crisis alone, but if I can get a group of guys to work together, I’ll be safer . . . When shit goes bad, half you guys [law enforcement/emergency response] are 50 miles away. So, can you protect your family? Do you understand the law? Can you handle a firearm? Can you survive? . . . That is why militia training is so important: you have to train for stressful situations.

A friend of a member of an eastern Kentucky branch of a III% militia, Ryan (3567268), explained his friend’s motivations for membership this way: “Think about places in eastern Kentucky: it takes 40 minutes to an hour for an ambulance to get you to a regional hospital, would someone survive a heart attack?” He tells me individuals want to be able to take care of themselves because “you won’t survive otherwise.” Matthew (4359402) summarizes his motivations for creating the East Kentucky Militia with a reason similar to the one Ryan ascribes to his militia friend: “The National Guard can’t get to my yard within 24 hours. I can.”

Florida leftist group member Brandon (1894948) similarly shares that his group is preparing to provide armed community defense for future natural disasters: “Community defense specifically is going to be somewhat limited based on what is legally allowed in each state. Florida is not an ‘Open Carry’ state, and it is only authorized in states of emergencies like hurricanes. Some groups are in the process of developing, or have developed, some level of contingency plans for events. Our focuses seem to have climate change in mind since we would be one of the states most immediately impacted by the effects.”

The connection participants make between exigencies, government capacity, and political and social trust are summarized by socialist defense group member Jeff (KY Left:2867389): “it’s very, very clear to me that the social fabric that keeps everything together in the United States is extremely weak. And so, it’s not so much that I don’t *trust* the government in the sense of I think they will do me harm—I don’t think they are powerful enough to hold back certain forces from taking hold if there was a particularly bad natural disaster or a particularly bad regional destabilization.”

In this section I discussed participants’ low approval levels of policing and justice systems, and shared accounts of these pessimistic assessments. Participant distrust of both police and government agencies to provide order under normal circumstances was extrapolated to exigencies. For all participants, the idea that government cannot regulate or respond to unrest and crime appeared to be based in a belief that private violence is beyond government control—and sometimes exacerbated through abusive armed policing. For my participants, firearms training represents a tangible action citizens can take to remedy existing government weakness and future government failures. In the next section I consider how participants interpret ineffective government capacity in social service provision as further evidence of the need to ‘look out for oneself.’

Assessments of State and Local Government

I also asked participants to evaluate whether state and local government are doing a ‘good job.’ For many participants these assessments were intertwined with opinions of political elites, and unsurprisingly negative. As militia member Hunter (TSM: 3354245) summarizes when I ask him about the biggest issues facing the US: “the media has lost its integrity, we have lost crucial trust in our institutions including trust in medical systems and health policies, election integrity, politicians being held accountable when breaking the law, the school systems, law enforcement . . . and much more.” Pink Pistols member Michael (LA PP: 1140182) similarly tells me that state and local government “often seem out of touch, and as I mentioned before, they seem to spend a great deal of money on things no one was really asking for while neglecting things people do want. I’m not sure that the local and state government helps much at all, and I would be willing to bet it has a net negative effect.”

When I ask militia member Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) who benefits from taxes, he appeals to participatory budgeting: “Well, it goes back to when the government

was created. It was created to do these jobs that need to be done while the rest of the country live their life and work their jobs. And everything that ever got decided was supposed to be put to a vote. When is the last time you remember being able to vote, or even someone looking for your opinion whether or not they can raise or lower your taxes? I mean, last time I checked ain't no one ever asked me, 'Hey, we're going to take this percent of your taxes and put it toward this.' We don't know where it goes."

William (JBGC: 1390238) reflects many opinions among leftist participants when he responds that "the government in our state spends about 99 percent of its time ensuring that the rich get whatever they want, including being able to hang the thread of poverty and homelessness over the working class. It spends the other one percent of its time arguing about which wealthy people's hobbies should get the most public money."

Participants also mentioned failures in the social welfare system as further evidence that government was incapable of adequately protecting citizens from gun violence and natural disasters. This appeared in two ways. First, some participants implicitly mapped social service failures onto perceptions of state capacity. Weaknesses in bureaucratic provision offered additional evidence of the inability to 'count on' the state in times of crisis. Second, participants connected government failure to address socioeconomic inequalities with the root causes of gun violence. Thus, the continued failure of government to address systemic social service failings further justified the need for armed defense in both cases.

When asked about his feelings on the state of healthcare, for instance, militia member David (KDLM: 1342898) expressed disappointment and an unwillingness to engage with medical professionals: "I think that the state of healthcare today is swayed, once again, by the big corporations. Obviously, marketing techniques—marketing strategies—have more weight on our economy and on our healthcare system today than the true concern of taking care of people . . . does this drug actually help someone or does it have a longer list of side effects? . . . I mean, that is really all they are in it for: to make money, not really to take care of people."²³⁴ David says he does not "use health insurance and I don't go to the doctor. I'm a veteran, so I do go to the Veteran's [Affairs] when I do need medical, but I don't do any pharmaceutical . . . I think that we need to get on track with—each person should be responsible for their own medical, and the government should stay out of it."

²³⁴ Question: How do you feel about the state of healthcare in Kentucky and the United States?

Ohio Defense Force member Robert (1793091) similarly recounts how his multiple encounters with social welfare systems were unreliable, proving to him that government could not be relied upon for even basic care. After discussing how he struggled to obtain social welfare services as a single father (see Chapter 3 on ‘Intergroup Competition’), Rob (ODF: 1793091) goes on to share that “the system was not made to get you off the system . . . Do what you can, because coming down to the system is a way of life. If you fight the system, it will fight you . . . The system is meant to keep people dumb and poor.”

Rob’s account reflects how, for some participants, owning guns is also related to sentiments around not being reliant on ‘social handouts.’ The impression left from such negative encounters with welfare institutions, as Rob (1793091) concludes, is that “nothing is going to change until community realizes you have to rely on you and your neighbor, not the government and politicians.” If public institutions do not function well under normal circumstances, how can government hope to function any better in times of natural disaster or political crisis?

Participants across armed groups also discussed how the root causes of violence cannot be curtailed by government action. Militia member David (KDLM: 1342898) elaborates a well-documented argument of gun rights activists: “People just need to be more educated as to the fact that people shoot people. Guns don’t shoot people. It’s a tool. A carpenter uses a hammer, a dentist uses a drill, and a cop—it’s a tool. You look across the world, you look at places like England and places like Australia that they’ve taken their guns, and they’ve got mass knife killings and they’ve got, you know, poisonings, and people throwing acid on people.”²³⁵

While these arguments are well-worn talking points of gun advocates on the right, this reasoning also appeared in my interviews with leftist and community defense group members. Interviews from these participants often referenced how the majority of gun deaths since at least the 1980s are suicides (cf. Azrael et al. 2017, 38; Kochanek et al. 2019, 12-13; DeConde 2001, 244). The SRA frequently shares information about the socioeconomic causes of violence that root from capitalism and government failure to equitably provide healthcare and basic standards of living (cf. Figure 6.3).

²³⁵ Question: What do most people get wrong about gun ownership?



Firearms aren't the cause of violence.

Here are the primary causes:

1. **Patriarchy**, toxic masculinity, male fragility, and male entitlement.
2. **Alienation**, social dislocation, lonerism, lack of human connection and solidarity, and the dog-eat-dog cult of the heroic individual that tells men that they are either "winners" or worthless and that getting ahead at any cost is *the* goal in life.
3. **Nihilistic and neurotic consumerism** that is empty and unfulfilling.
4. **Economic desperation** and changing demographics, leading to perceived anger, hopelessness, and loss of power.
5. **Lack of universal healthcare**, making support and mental health professionals inaccessible (noting the vast majority of the mentally ill are adamantly not a risk for causing violence, but rather at risk of being victimized.)
6. **Reactionary politics** fed by conspiracy theories explaining the above.

There is one single thread running through each of these: **capitalism**.

Want to do something about Columbine, Aurora, Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, Parkland, Christchurch, and more? Don't fall for feel-good, easy do-nothing solutions like gun control, especially when doing so will be harmful to the vulnerable. Look at the actual causes.

To end gun violence, smash capitalism.

@SocialistRA | SocialistRA.org

Source: facebook.com>thispusheenkillsfascists

FIGURE 6.3. SRA social media post

Screenshot taken from a March 24, 2021 Instagram post by a Pennsylvania SRA chapter.

Socialist defense group member Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) shares how he lost a family member to gun violence, and points to the structural disparities that led to her death:

There is no gun control legislation that would have prevented her murder. But healthcare for all . . . actual socialized housing . . . *those things* would have saved her life, *absolutely* . . . gun deaths are in this country—they are by far and away suicide—which is again, if you have access to meaningful mental healthcare . . . that will drastically decline gun deaths. And then gun homicides are particularly located in specific zip codes . . . so really, it's the fact that gun violence actually . . . only affect[s] very specific communities, and, you know, if you're not going to address the root cause of economic inequality that is creating these desperate situations . . . So, there are just these super fucking complex situations where . . . taking the guns out doesn't really fit. Like, all of the problems that you're pointing to are actually problems with capitalism and the way that this society functions.

As Justin (GA Pink Pistols: 4659213) explains, “I know there’s obviously a lot of social factors that lead to violence—gun violence notwithstanding—there are a lot of economic and social factors that lead to *violence*, and personally owning guns can only protect you from a small portion of that violence, I think.”

In other words, observed context around the argument that people kill people—not access to firearms—suggests that these ideas reflect more than just talking points. The failure of law enforcement and government to consistently provide collective security was consistently referenced as a motivating reason for private arming to defend self and community. As militia member Matt (East KY Militia: 4359402) surmises when I ask why the Second Amendment is important: “My firepower is going to be as great as anyone that will come in front of me. That is the way it should be. ‘Cause how are you going to try and protect your home with a musket whenever they come in with AR-15s or a SKS?”²³⁶

In this section I evaluated participants’ assessments of, first, policing efficacy, justice systems, and government institutions. Second, I evaluated participants’ perceptions of state and local governments and social welfare provision. Evidence presented throughout both sections demonstrated how many participants directly linked their motivations for joining armed groups with concerns around government capacity, particularly during crisis. Further, participant discourse evidenced how government failures in the provision of social welfare benefits, as well as negative encounters with state officials, mediated actors’ views of government capacity and levels of political trust.

Removing guns from the US landscape is an unfathomable proposition for most of my participants. Because this reality is not perceived as possible, or normatively palatable, the state is inevitably perceived as failing to provide order. When government cannot or will not provide for communities, public defense becomes an individual responsibility. As Zach (FL Left: 3028541) explains:

²³⁶ SKS stands for ‘Self-Loading Carbine of the Simonov System,’ and is a Russian rifle designed in the 1940s (Beckhusen 2017).

. . . the role of the government is to serve the people by protecting their rights and providing general safety through rule of law. The government is permitted to do this with the consent of the people. If the government fails to uphold its end of the bargain, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish that government . . . on a more micro-scale, sectarian violence is a distinct possibility in the near future. To act as if this could not happen in America is beyond naive. And, as I said before, if cops get guns, so should the people. But fuck cops.²³⁷

While frequently focused on threats from others in society, participants' fears often recognized the fundamental failure of policing and law enforcement to prevent these circumstances. For all participants, the weakness of state social provision led to a pragmatic awareness that community and self-defense must be shouldered by citizens, even if that should not be the case. As SRA member Shawn (AZ SRA: 2986463) tells me, "I have not struggled to the degree that many, many other people have, and this is what motivates me, as well as many comrades, to give support to our community. There is little to nothing we can expect from the state in terms of helping the proletariat and our houseless comrades."

State capacity failures at the local, state, and federal levels were directly cited by participants as motivations for seeking out defensive arms. In the next section I illustrate how, as government interventions continue to prove ineffective at solving the root causes of interpersonal violence in the US, the mentality that 'one must look out for oneself' enables armed groups in this research to perceive arms training as an act of public good with emotional rewards for service-oriented action.

IV. Armed Defense as Meaningful Action

While it is clear that distrust of political elites and government capacity appear in armed actors' motivations, the question remains how and why armed defense is a response to these perceived threats. Participant accounts suggest the answer is twofold. First, perceptions of weakened state capacity appear to encourage participants to seek out arms training for self and communal protection. Rather than disengaging participants from the political process, low levels of political trust helped encourage these actors to pursue armed community defense as a 'service' compensating for perceived government failures. Second, recognition of the inadequacy of policing and

²³⁷ Question: Do you think it is important to own guns? Why?

government allowed participants to view the action of joining an armed group as a legitimate and vital service to the communities these groups seek to train and protect. In short, for armed defense to be perceived as a ‘civic’ good, actors rhetorically identified how the arms training offered by their group addresses existing weaknesses in society, and thus fulfills a semi-authoritative, or ‘legitimate,’ role.

More recent comparative politics scholarship observes political action in relation to the non-material rewards participation provides, such as emotional pride in taking decisive action that aligns with one’s belief about what is ‘right’ (cf. Wood 2003; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 44-48; Jasper 2011). Similarly, I find that the rewards participants discuss in this section derive from performing the role of armed preparedness on behalf of others. Individuals who seek out arms training in this research are not stockpiling guns and practicing at the range to defend against home invaders and robbers—this could be done without joining an armed group. Instead, members practice shooting skills and emergency preparedness in informal groups whose vetting and safety practices contribute to the participants’ perception of their acts as a public service.

My participants directly connected their membership in armed groups with the volunteer provision of specialized skills to community. When I ask David (KDLM:1342898) about his favorite parts of militia membership, he replies, “being able to help people, and help people study, and help people train to protect themselves and to prepare their families for situations that we don’t want to think about. I guess those are the two things probably: being able to help other people that are less knowledgeable, and just to have the camaraderie of the guys. I mean, as a military veteran it’s like there is a hole in your heart when you leave—when you get out of the military—there is a place in your heart that will never be filled again . . . So that place is filled, a little bit, with the camaraderie that we get in our militia service.” David describes his fellow militia members as “outstanding citizens that just want to be left alone. And we want to live our lives and, you know, work our jobs, and do what we want to do, and exercise our freedom and liberties. However, if there is ever a need for the last line of defense, we will be here to stand.”

Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) similarly discusses how his prior law enforcement and military training could be helpful to local agencies when times become difficult: “the militia is not federally regulated and we voluntarily . . . fall under the sheriff’s department. You know, to help the sheriff with anything that needs to be done. You know, I was a federal law enforcement officer—I was an ex-police officer . . . I was in

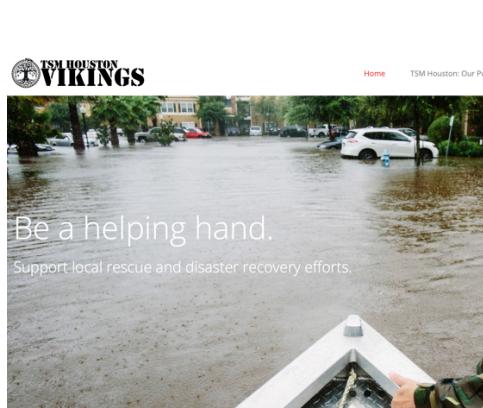
the military. . . I was a paramedic, a firefighter, and, you know, a mechanic—I was trained as a mechanic.” Josh (WV Militia: 1768333) explains that he enjoys being in a militia because “I still get to serve. That is the main thing. See, like, my whole life, I was in the Cub Scouts, the Webelos . . . then I was a lifeguard and then I joined [military and law enforcement] . . . I’ve always been on the side of choosing justice and the American way, you know? I should have a big ‘S’ on my chest so I can fly around—I’m kidding [laughs]. Superman, you know? But no, and that is what the big thing is about the militia; it’s to still give back.”

Brian (III%/KSM Recruit: 4831771) tells me how he wants to join a militia to take part in a family tradition of military service on both sides, “including service in Vietnam, World War II, World War I, and possibly the Civil War as well.” Brian did not qualify for military service and saw the militia as a way to fulfil his family’s legacy by participating in a military culture that he felt was a part of his identity and upbringing.

For many militia participants, stated desires to train with arms also demonstrated a commitment to ‘standing up’ for specific communities. For instance, Rob (ODF:1793091) tells me that “on the militia side most people feel like me. We see all this wrong being done and just let it happen, but if you say something, you’re a racist . . . That is what white flight was about—it’s all talk . . . You’re blaming others for a lack of parenting or standing up. You blame whites, cops, the media, but you’re not doing anything.” Joseph (TN Militia: 3753342) similarly shares that his favorite part of membership is “being part of something bigger than me. Fellowship. Being around people with similar interests.” Joseph tells me he joined his Tennessee militia “in the interest of mutual assistance.”

Militia recruitment materials often emphasize how membership is just as much about giving back to community and helping individuals in times of crisis as it is about firearms training (cf. Figure 6.4). On its website, the Houston chapter of the Texas State Militia states that “some of the most important and critical programs in the militia are our volunteer and charity work . . . Because we see the struggles that our fellow citizens face on a day-to-day basis, we feel it’s our duty to support them where we can. TSM has many volunteer programs that our members can take part in. From Habitat for

Humanity, to the Houston Food Bank, to search and rescue work, there is no shortage of ways to help.”²³⁸



We Train in Defense.

We legally train community members for the purpose of community defense, and we don't rely on the state to do our work for us.

We fully stand for the right of all adults who would defend themselves and their communities against far-right violence. This right includes the right to own, carry, and train with tactically useful rifles, pistols, and body armor.

We Work Within Our Community.

We form coalitions with communities (of which many of us are a part) and organizations in our region - in particular, those from communities of color, indigenous communities, LGBTQ communities, all kinds of workers (from sex workers to tech workers), poor communities, homeless and migrant communities, religious minorities, those harmed by state violence (including prisoners), and organizations whose stated goals align with our goals.



FIGURE 6.4. TSM Houston homepage

Screenshot of Texas State Militia (Houston) homepage taken on February 27, 2022 at <https://tsmhouston.org>.

FIGURE 6.5. Puget Sound JBGC homepage

Screenshot of Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club homepage taken on February 27, 2022 at <https://psjbgc.org>.

Armed groups on the left similarly stress that firearms training is only one part of their community defense work (cf. Figure 6.5). A member of the Arizona SRA, Shawn (2986463), explains, “if we say that firearm ownership is important for self and community defense, we also have to acknowledge that it is not the most important aspect. It may even be the least important . . . Satisfying our community’s basic needs will do way more for protecting people than any firearm will ever achieve.”

When I ask William (JBGC: 1390238) about the JBGC, he tells me that his group believes “all aspects of community defense, including building strong community networks and engaging in mutual aid, are equally important.” William says that their chapter primarily provides “logistical support and typically—virtually always—unarmed physical security for actions by community groups, as well as working on our own mutual aid projects and collaborating with other mutual aid projects in local communities, as well as firearms safety and practical instruction.”

²³⁸ “Community Work” section on TSM Houston website, accessed March 2, 2022 at <https://tsmhouston.org/community-work/>.

After his experience as a police liaison in Charlottesville, Jeff (KY Left: 2867389) similarly recounts how joining his socialist armed group was primarily about learning emergency response skills to help others: “the skills that I have in terms of, like, negotiating with police were just completely *fucking* useless. There wasn’t anything to do—they weren’t fucking there; they didn’t do their fucking job. But I didn’t have any basic first aid or medical skills . . . I was fairly calm. I wasn’t, like, trauma injured—or at least, not yet . . . but there I was, like, well, fuck, I’m one of the few people that’s not completely losing their fucking shit right now and I have nothing to offer in this situation at all. So, it made me feel like I want to diversify my skills, get different skills, have some basic capabilities to help injured folks—also, provide basic security.”

Sometimes members viewed themselves as community liaisons and entry points to what can be an intimidating shooting culture for underrepresented groups. Georgia Pink Pistols member Justin (4659213) tells me that he “felt like I might be a good—almost a liaison to the community where I had connections, especially when it comes to guns . . . I am personally well-trained and certified, and I could almost be an olive branch to those that may not have that.” Similarly, Zach (FL Left: 3028541) tells me that leftist defense groups like his are important because “firearms education is a serious matter, but can be very intimidating and scary. Learning from folks you trust and who trust you makes it a heck of a lot nicer.”

When I ask JBGC member William (1390238) why groups like his are important, he replies, “I think it’s important for there to be visibly armed leftists in the community so violent white supremacists don’t think they can get away with harming people. I think it’s important for community defense groups to also help the community in other ways, like distributing supplies and education. We offer firearms lessons to marginalized community members for free.” Will says his favorite part of membership is “being able to spend time with my comrades and pursue shooting as a hobby without worrying that anyone is secretly terrible—and I really enjoy when we are able to do something for the community that no other local group could.”

Fellow JBGC chapter member Alex (4770945) tells me they joined the group because they “wanted to help the community and I wanted to know more armed leftists.” Alex says that the group does “mutual aid and community defense. Once a week we go to downtown and hand out food, water, socks, hygiene items, and harm reduction supplies to houseless community members. We also shoot together and train for being safe and effective carriers of firearms. We don’t train for offense.” Alex says they “left

an all-femme gun group before I joined JBGC because one person decided she was our leader, then proceeded to treat me and every other white femme in the group like absolute shit. We also didn't actually do anything, just sat around and made plans that never came together.”

Being able to participate in active service work also motivates Zach (FL Left: 3028541), who tells me that fellow members “are regular people who just want to provide a space for folks to learn, and opportunities to help their community. We like to shoot guns, we like to feed the homeless, we like to help our neighbors, we like to share our expertise freely.”²³⁹

In this section and throughout this research I presented accounts of why individuals joined their armed group, why participants think private gun ownership is important, and what members find meaningful about their activities. Actors across armed groups in this sample emphasized how their membership offered rewarding service opportunities. These sentiments included ‘gratification’ derived from sharing prior training, participating in routine community service work, providing defense to unarmed populations, offering a ‘safe’ space for non-traditional gun owners, and providing representation for groups who are not perceived as armed (e.g., queer and nonbinary populations), or who face stigmas when arming (e.g., BIPOC populations). As Robert (1793091) of the Ohio Defense Force concludes, “one thing the militia taught me: stand up for myself and stand up when something wrong is going on.”

The idea that engaging in self-defense through arms training is not just necessary, but also an individual responsibility—even a duty—relates to participants’ observations of government’s failures. To be able to frame arms training as a contribution to the greater good, groups must identify how their actions mirror or compensate for government, and therefore represent legitimate and essential service. After all, the offer of supplemental force is at minimum an implicit acknowledgement that government *needs* help due to a lack of legitimacy or capacity. Short of military or law enforcement enlistment, joining an armed group is one of the very few political actions that grants participants the same ‘status’ of an essential public servant *because* group membership offers actors a way to perceive their gun use as a legitimate exercise of violence.

²³⁹ Question: What do most people not understand about groups like yours?

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined participants' perceptions of political distrust in relation to their stated and perceived motivations for armed action. Through qualitative interviews and observations of armed group members across the political spectrum, I sought to understand how my participants perceived government, and whether these perceptions appeared to help motivate my actors to join armed groups.

I first discussed evidence of distrust in political elites. No participants trusted national politicians, and many individuals independently raised the issue of elite corruption with concerns around political profiteering and corporate lobbying. Second, I evaluated whether low levels of trust correlated with political disengagement in this sample. Armed group members in this research reported high levels of political activism, but low levels of perceived democratic efficacy, and general pessimism about the future of the country. Third, I discussed participants' institutional trust of government's ability to enforce order and provide basic social welfare. Participant responses in this section advocated for arms and preparedness training as a remedy for both ongoing and potential failures by government institutions. Participants continued to identify corruption as a problem in service provision and policing, and perceived that expanded government power would not only be ineffective, but could also be abused or used against communities.

While others in the US may recognize the same government shortcomings, armed actors in this sample provided examples of how these government failures created the conditions for more extreme cases of organized social violence, including potential civil war. Thus, interviews in this research also informally recorded low levels of social trust across armed groups, whose members appear less concerned about stochastic criminal violence, and more focused on the potential of widespread collective violence.

Fourth, I used participants' accounts to ask how and why firearms are associated with political action in response to distrust and perceived government weakness. Evidence in this research provides two potential answers. First, perceptions of weakened institutional capacity appear to directly encourage participants to seek out armed defense for self and community protection. Second, lower levels of political trust indirectly appear to encourage privately organized defense by conceptualizing armed action as a 'justified' service to communities that government agencies fail to provide for, or will fail to provide for in the future. Armed group membership and firearms training in this

research, in other words, is perceived by my participants as a ‘semi-sanctioned’ and ‘service-oriented’ political action, and thus offers emotional rewards for actors.

While all participants displayed strong distrust in state infrastructure and elites, distrust in state institutions was not consistent across armed group members. Some militias, for instance, distrusted state police and certain federal agencies—sometimes due to conspiracist beliefs—while having more confidence in local policing. Similarly, consistently high distrust among leftist armed group members in part reflects an understanding of US politics as systemically beholden to capitalist interests. As discussed in Chapter 5, political beliefs can influence actors’ interpretations of events, and conspiracist narratives can create conditions of distrust and fear well beyond the reality of actual danger. And as discussed in Chapter 3, these political beliefs and fears may also be reinforced through early firearms socialization that makes armed defense a familiar, community-oriented response, regardless of one’s political leanings.

In the next chapter I review the evidence presented in Chapters 2 through 6 and offer concluding observations. In addition to summarizing the primary results of this research, I offer additional insights and recommendations for future academic studies and policymaking.

7. Conclusion

This research started with the question of why, given the relatively high internal security of the United States, do individuals feel motivated to join armed community defense groups? What threats do actors perceive on the ground that make collective arming meaningful and important? Prior research on the Militia Movement and gun activists correctly identifies armed defense as a response to distrust of government, but does not fully understand how some actors interpret and act on this political distrust. Rather than fighting future tyranny, militias and armed actors of various political orientations also arm because of government's perceived weakness, not its strength. And rather than fearing crime—as Carlson (2015, 2018) documents in interviews with gun carriers in Michigan—my actors vocalized fears of non-random, systemic, and organized social violence. As participants' fears are of collective others and institutional failures, rather than stochastic violence from deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, actors in this research rest more blame on corrupted politics and policing than social others.

High levels of political and institutional distrust among participants further reinforced beliefs that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own defense, regardless of whether this should be the case. The presence of targeted violence, armed others, and perceptions of hostile, corrupt, or at minimum, ineffective justice and policing systems entrenched perceptions that private armed security is pragmatically necessary. Yet, actors in this study largely focused on how joining armed groups was less about their own protection, and more often about volunteering armed defense and preparedness skills to communities in need. In other words, observations from this research suggest that any structural account of armed mobilization requires consideration of the mediating variables of actors' perceptions. I show how not only are actors' perceptions of the threats they mobilize against important, but also the perceived 'rewards' offered from taking action against these concerns.

Throughout this research I illuminated some of the similarities between the varied armed groups in this sample to demonstrate the importance of considering how these actors operate in a system of internal policing and private violence created by government decisions. Such parallels, as we have seen throughout this text, do not extend to the populations the armed groups in this research seek to protect. I do not

dwell on whether participants are normatively justified in joining armed groups, as such considerations offer little analytical leverage for the questions addressed here. Instead, I have sought to present accounts from armed group members of varying positionalities to allow individuals to voice their own critiques, concerns, and challenges to the armed groups, actors, and state agents they interact with and respond to on the ground.

In this concluding chapter, I first summarize the findings and implications from the preceding chapters. Second, I highlight a few key theoretical implications and contributions from this research. Third, I offer recommendations for US policymaking on firearms regulation. Finally, I conclude with what this study suggests for future research agendas.

I. Armed Mobilization, Distrust, and Public Service

I began this research in Chapter 2 by situating contemporary armed groups in historical context. I documented how US federal and state government decisions to regulate private violence along racial and gendered lines constructed and entrenched norms of ‘virtuous’ gun owners as white, heteronormative males. Government and judicial decisions over time conferred ‘status’ to private gun use by clearly defining which populations were not entitled to arms. Throughout US history, and to this day, gun ownership served as “an important symbol of white male status” (Hofstadter 1970; Kahan 1999, 458; Kohn 2004, 96; Melzer 2009, 35).

In contrast to western Europe and Britain, weak and corrupt local policing and sluggish centralized law enforcement in the US failed to create norms that placed firearms largely in the hands of state agents rather than private individuals (cf. Tilly 1992, 69; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 145; Kaufman 2001, 88-90). Thus, “elsewhere the armed masses remained a vision of revolutionaries. In America, by a curious inversion, they became a symbol of order and a conservative totem” (Kennett and Anderson 1976, 252). Rather than a libertarian predestination, however, governmental failure to regulate guns reflects competing, and at times shared, interests across industrialist, military, and political elites.

If the US possesses an ‘exceptional’ gun culture, this exceptionalism has little to do with indelible cultural individualism, and almost everything to do with institutionally entrenched white supremacy and business interests. Rather than using centuries of history to explain armed groups in 2022, this chapter spends time elaborating the US

story of gun control to illustrate how patterns of private violence manifest in contemporary gun ownership demographics. I show how nationalist symbols, frames, and discourses are not static, but instead are instrumentalized and repackaged for contemporary audiences in ways that distinguish ‘legitimate’ from ‘criminal’ gun wielders.

In the remaining chapters I evaluated fieldwork data for evidence of predicted explanations for armed mobilization identified in prior comparative politics scholarship. In Chapter 3 I provided anonymized demographic data for my sample and analyzed participants’ interviews for evidence of ‘economic precarity’ (relative deprivation). My results aligned with findings from prior studies of militias, armed ethnonationalists, politically violent groups, and gun owners, all of which note how these actors appear to be relatively ‘average’ or above average in terms of income and education levels (cf. Perlinger 2012, 98-99; Aho 1995; Freilich and Pridemore 2005; McVeigh 2009, 29-30; Fryer and Levitt 2012; Vertigans 2007, 645-646; Oraka et al. 2019; Azrael et al. 2017; Saad 2020; Hepburn et al. 2007; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 170).

Further confirming these observations, I contributed additional evidence around the high costs of gun ownership and firearms training that suggests objective economic precarity may not explain US armed mobilization well. Indeed, armed group membership appears to require a minimum level of resources, and participants’ descriptions of responsible gun ownership involved fairly significant financial and time commitments (e.g., regular training and education). In short, minimum resource thresholds exist for armed mobilization beyond the initial purchase of a firearm. As discussed in Chapter 2, not only unequal access to resources, but also lack of opportunities to participate in cultural norms of ‘virtuous’ gun use continue to violently and softly concentrate firearms knowledge and access among white males in the US.

I also asked participants open-ended questions about their perceived socioeconomic positioning, which enabled me to examine discourse for unstated or less obvious sentiments of precarity that would not necessarily appear in studies situated at higher levels of analysis. My participants did not perceive themselves to be facing economic precarity presently or in the future. While some militia participants used discourse around material outgroup competition, subsequent chapters demonstrated how the outgroup sentiments captured in this chapter interact with political trust and social resentment in different ways than predicted by structural accounts of relative deprivation.

In Chapter 4 I discussed social resentment mechanisms argued to drive armed mobilization in existing political research. Prior literature suggests defensive arming may be a response to social resentment (outgroup animosity), and/or an empowering way to perform identities that contest or reinforce the image of heteronormative, white male gun owners (ingroup bonding). I did not find rhetoric around social ‘others’ to form a substantive portion of interview text or arise in discussions of reasons for action in the militia participant accounts considered here. For individuals in leftist and constituency-based community defense groups, acknowledgement of a conservative, white, heteronormative male ‘monopoly’ on gun culture led to stated concerns of targeted violence. While combatting ‘toxic’ gun culture was important for groups outside the militia right, this goal was often part of a larger and more pragmatic strategy of armed deterrence. As participant accounts in Chapter 6 demonstrated, evidence in this chapter ultimately underscores how socioeconomic concerns are inextricably intertwined with wider sentiments of political and social distrust in this sample.

Chapter 4 also recorded how participants’ feelings of ‘empowerment’ often appeared in accounts of how they helped arm and train others, contributing evidence to the importance of emotional reward mechanisms discussed in the last chapter. Stories of personal empowerment (or positive ‘self-esteem’) from gun use were noticeably absent in participants’ descriptions of their own firearms habits and experiences. More mundanely, most participants shared similar stories of socialization around gun use in adolescence and early adulthood, as well as a general interest in mechanics or shooting as a pastime. Although early socialization might explain why individuals in my sample feel comfortable handling guns and teaching firearms skills to others, these findings do not distinguish my armed group members from the general population of gun owners, who are likewise likely to have been introduced to firearms through family at an early age.

In Chapter 5 I reviewed participant and group discourse for evidence of belief-oriented motivations for membership. Given that militia group members in leadership positions and senior roles are overrepresented in my sample, it is relatively surprising that I do not find stronger evidence of political discourse in participants’ stated reasons for membership. On the militia right and in many community defense groups, participants articulated clear support for limited government and localist ideas, but primarily felt they had joined armed groups because of concerns that government services would become weaker, not stronger. While rhetorically discussing the need for

an armed citizenry to deter government power, very few participants and groups viewed their own arms training as a symbolic stand against tyranny, and many militias perceived their service as supplementing, rather than supplanting, government authority.

Similarly, while leftist group members acknowledged the theoretical importance of an armed proletariat, these political understandings were not the primary reasons individuals said they joined groups such as the Socialist Rifle Association. Instead, participants emphasized how their membership countered the immediate threat and effects of capitalism, armed white supremacists, and targeted violence against marginalized communities. Participants in leftist and socialist defense groups supported state actions to more equitably distribute national wealth, but were less willing to accept state intervention in arms control. Although religious, conspiracist, and political beliefs were not found to be important for my actors' stated motivations, political beliefs clearly influenced meso-level outcomes, including the structure, goals, and constituencies of armed groups.

Chapter 5 also illustrated how, despite varied political and social beliefs, all participants rhetorically embraced an individual responsibility for community defense that viewed private arming as a shared good. The observation that participants of varied positionalities similarly embraced an individual responsibility for public order presents complementary evidence to literature on individualism and Foucauldian 'governmentality' (or privatized sovereignty) as a response to the socioeconomic conditions and beliefs created by neoliberal policies and political discourse (cf. Garland 1996, 1997; Wacquant 2009; Carlson 2012, 2014, 2018, 68-69; Gahman 2015; Bettache and Chiu 2019; Esposito and Finley 2014; Kaplan-Lyman 2012; Kapczynski and Purdy 2018; Rose 2000). Overall, structural observations around political beliefs are found to be important primarily for situating US armed groups within the modern contexts in which they operate. In short, political programs and beliefs appeared to be important enabling conditions, but did not fully explain the motivations for armed action at the actor level documented here.

In Chapter 6 I discussed the role of political distrust and emotional rewards from political action as potential explanations for armed mobilization. Participants in this research displayed consistently high levels of distrust in political elites regardless of group framing and mission. Perceptions of corruption were widespread across participant accounts, and lawmakers were felt to be in office largely to reap material rewards. These sentiments appeared even though no interview question directly asked

about corruption. My participants were equally pessimistic in their assessments of policing, welfare institutions, and state and local governments. Additionally, all participants underscored how government and police could not protect citizens in times of peace or crisis, making armed community defense a pragmatic need.

Rather than alienating and disengaging my armed actors, recognition of government failure instead enabled participants to view their armed actions as a form of public service. Participants all pointed to the emotionally meaningful rewards armed group membership offered through opportunities to ‘give back’ and help undefended communities. Thus, I find status important for armed actors in this research, but the ‘statused identities’ actors perceive from armed action are related to service roles around the ‘legitimate’ use of violence. For actors in this sample, armed defense offers a semi-sanctioned use of firearms unavailable outside other narrower, authorized professions such as armed services and policing. Indeed, thirty percent of my sample had backgrounds in armed services, and often mentioned how armed groups offered a way to ‘altruistically’ apply their firearms and preparedness knowledge in ways not unlike prior military or law enforcement service.

In short, this research uses a case study of politically varied armed groups in the US to illustrate the importance of disaggregating individual and group-level motivations and outcomes from the systemic arrangements that enable collective armed action. This research demonstrates how participants not only respond to structural changes in social and material ‘status,’ but also to more tangible concerns rooted in deeper social and political distrust. Rather than ideologues or anti-government ‘extremists,’ actors in this sample perceived their armed political action as a way to contribute to the protection of specific communities they feel are underserved, or will be left unprotected by government. Regardless of the outcomes of group actions and which constituencies these groups view themselves protecting, understanding how actors in this research come to join armed groups illustrated the often unobserved variations in armed action on the ground. In the next section I broaden these implications and review some key theoretical insights from this research for wider scholarship.

II. Selected Implications

In this section I review four implications of this research for comparative politics literature. While not a comprehensive discussion of the contributions offered in this

study, the conclusions discussed in this section hold the widest interest for outside readers across academic and professional fields. I first focus on implications from this research for political action studies, and in particular the importance of qualitative accounts for studies of armed mobilization and threat formation. I next discuss potential implications for our understanding of non-state armed actors in global contexts. Third, and relatedly, I elaborate how observations in this case point to studying not only the national cultural symbology around firearms, but also considering the comparative authority and ‘legitimacy’ granted to private actors through gun use. I finally offer some potentially transportable insights for studies of ‘far-right’ political behavior and ‘populist’ movements.

First, the core implication and contribution from this research is the importance of understanding the socially situated nature of threat and its relationship to political action. While widespread private gun ownership in the US increases an individual’s likelihood to encounter gun violence, the majority of my participants had not directly experienced physical violence.²⁴⁰ Only three individuals had been in ‘triggering’ situations with armed actors—at the 2017 Unite the Right rally, at a Patriot Prayer protest, and during an armed mugging. Instead, narratives in this research emphasized how events in other places and near misses with violence, such as the August 2020 Kyle Rittenhouse shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin, encouraged defensive action without the need for direct physical threat.

Far from unique to the US context, scholarship on political violence might also investigate how defensive arming in security dilemmas and unstable or violent contexts may similarly relate to perceptions of threat removed from objective insecurity. I do not mean to suggest that objective threat does not give rise to action, nor that any actor’s motivations can be reduced to moncausal motives. I document a case of objective threat in my own sample with Jeff, who mobilized largely in response to his experience at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. Rather, this research illuminates how the context, beliefs, and local landscape of armed actors, including state agents, influence how individuals understand ‘threat’ and their own reasons for defensive mobilization. While a quite different context, Javier Osorio, Livia Schubiger, and Michael Weintraub

²⁴⁰ In a 2017 nationally representative survey Pew Research Center found around 57 percent of Black and 43 percent of both white and Hispanic adults knew someone who had been shot (accidentally or intentionally); and around 32 percent of Black, 20 percent of white, and 24 percent of Hispanic adults had been threatened with a gun or knew a family member who had been threatened (Parker et al. 2017).

(2021, 1568) show how varied outcomes in contemporary community defense mobilization in Mexico can be explained with “historical processes of armed mobilization” that “alter collective preferences, social networks, and mobilizational resources,” all of which influence how communities decide to respond to threat.

Observations in this research also overlap with scholarship that emphasizes the importance of emotions and threat as multidimensional mediating variables in explanations of political behavior (cf. Almeida 2019; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Wood 2003; Jasper 2011; McDoom 2012; Fritsche, Jonas, and Kessler 2011; Schlipphak 2021; Renström and Bäck 2021; Shesterinia 2016). Comparatively, literature suggests that perceptions of grievance, risk, and threat are influenced by political discourse, as well as actors’ social networks and worldviews (cf. Almeida 2019; Shesterinia 2016; Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub 2021, 1569; Klandermans 2013; Douglas and Wildavsky 1983; Schlipphak 2021). For instance, the social construction of threat around imagined ‘outgroups’ (‘othering’), and related pressures for ingroup bonding, are well documented (cf. Fritsche, Jonas, and Kessler 2011; Almeida 2019; Magcamit 2020). Less well documented are cases such as this study where groups mobilize in response to threats that appear unconnected to predicted socioeconomic grievances.

Second, this research pushes back on dichotomous conceptualizations of political violence and state security provision. As Chapter 2 illustrated, viewing the state’s centralized control of violence as a non-linear and variable process allows the inclusion of national security arrangements which diverge from the European model of a strong, bureaucratized, central state, and more accurately reflect the reality of how governments manage internal violence across time (cf. Pereira 2003; Obert 2018; Parrott 2012, 8; Carey and Mitchell 2017, 128; Thomson 1994; Mazzei 2009, 6-7). Conceptualizing the centralization of coercive state force as both non-linear and dynamic additionally allows political researchers to understand popular and government support for private arms as related to different institutional arrangements and beliefs around government power.

Future analysis should consider how contexts where private individuals are responsible for their own defense in place of, or alongside, government may not always reflect exceptionally ‘weak’ or absent state power. As Jennifer Carlson (2014, 347) argues in a study of gun carrying practices in the US, South Africa, and India, localities that “have a long-standing history of precarious state monopoly on sovereign power . . . and a deep-seated culture of using informal social controls . . . will provide a better

breeding ground for pro-gun sentiment. In contrast, in places with strong, centralized policing apparatuses and a general culture of reliance on formal, state-centric mechanisms of social control (i.e., much of western Europe), pro-gun cultures will be less likely to take root and flourish.”

Rather than unique to the US, the coupling of neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibility for defense with ‘rights’ to firearm ownership, as well as ‘masculine’ and racialized gun carrying practices, are argued to play a role in outside contexts (cf. Carlson 2014; Cukier and Sheptycki 2012; Cavalcanti 2017; Kurlantzick 2006). Donna Goldstein (2007, 37) notes, for instance, how the seemingly “US-constrained” rhetoric of guns as a symbol of freedom “appears to travel quite well and acquire new meanings in different [Brazilian] contexts.” Regardless of whether one accepts that contemporary individualism is related to the effects of neoliberal political discourse and policy, at the root of these comparative accounts of gun use one finds popular distrust in both state policing and governments’ capacity to protect citizens from internal violence.

The sentiments of endemic corruption in political elites and policing I capture in Chapter 6 are notably even more translatable to outside cases. Brazilians at the time of the gun ban referendum faced much higher rates of corruption, police brutality, and private violence than witnessed in the US. As Goldstein (2007, 38) summarizes in a discussion of referendum attitudes in Rio de Janeiro: “the pro-gun lobby was able to convince the population of something widely known . . . namely, that criminals have access to guns and will continue to have them, and that the police are unable to protect ordinary citizens.” Thus, political and social trust, particularly situated in an understanding of non-static forms of violence regulation and institutional legacies, may be important for explaining not only armed action taken against or in support of the state, but also for armed action taken without clear political agendas.

Third, and relatedly, the ‘meaning’ of guns is an emerging research field with strong comparative implications (cf. Springwood 2007, 2014). While firearms are mundane consumer objects for much of US society, the use of guns as violent tools of social order by both state and non-state actors across global contexts is significant for understanding how individuals perceive membership in armed groups. Firearms symbolize physical power through their ability to ‘equalize’ natural disparities of force, as well as their ability to violently intimidate and police social interactions. While other weapons (and ordinary objects) are capable of, and are sometimes similarly designed for lethal outcomes, guns are viewed as deadlier than hand weapons because of their ability to

compensate for disparities in physicality. As a participant explains, “a firearm makes it so much easier to kill someone. You don’t have to be really brave, you know? You point it at them and you pull the trigger. Done. With a knife, oh, you got to mean it. You know? You’ve got to be up close and personal. It’s a whole different ballgame.”

However, firearms represent much more than brute force. Guns as an object are inextricably linked to authoritative status unobtainable through other tools. Governments around the world demonstrate symbolic and physical monopolies on internal coercion primarily through arming agents of the state with guns. Thus, as elaborated by a youth in Chicago in Richard Hofstadter’s (1970) famous gun culture essay: “A gun is status—that’s why they call it an equalizer . . . What’s happening today is that everybody’s getting more and more equal because everybody’s got one.” This research illustrates the importance of viewing the symbology and status around firearms as a product of institutions, government policy, political power, and social and class interests. As all governments must grapple with how and whether to control certain types of internal violence, explanations for private armed mobilization require consideration of when, how, and why states failed or succeeded in removing weapons from certain populations.

Gendered and ethnonationalist framings around who is entitled to the tools of violence (whether privately or in service of the state) also hold global salience due to the gendered and nationalist nature of military and state security apparatuses, as well the saturation of narratives from US popular culture, advertisers, and gun activists (cf. Cukier and Sheptycki 2012; Springwood 2007, 26-27). For instance, Hollywood gun violence and a ‘militarized’ shooting club culture were concerns in Britain after the Hungerford Massacre on August 19, 1987, when Michael Ryan killed 16 dressed as Rambo (cf. Baum 1988; AP 1987; BBC 2011; Webster 1989; Squires 2000, 213-220).²⁴¹ In parliamentary debate after Hungerford, Labour MP Lord Roy Hattersley noted, “That gun culture is not country sports and organised clubs, but the nightmare world of guns that is glamourized by some television programmes and newspapers. It is worth remembering that before Hungerford, when Rambo became a figure of hatred and fear,

²⁴¹ Rambo often plays a central role in discussions of the militarization of popular culture following the Vietnam War (cf. Gibson 1994; Jeffords 1988; Ehrenreich 2011, 228; Lamy 1996, 70-86; O’Brien and Haider-Markel 1998, 460). The fictional character of John Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone, is rumored to be inspired from the life of James ‘Bo’ Gritz, a leader of the Militia Movement and former US Army Special Forces officer who served in Vietnam, once ran for president, and was involved in federal negotiations at Ruby Ridge (Oltermann 2017; Gleberman 2017; Harris 1983; Lamy 1996, 92).

Rambo was a word that was used as praise and as the description of a hero in half our tabloid newspapers" (121 Parl. Deb. H.C. (6th ser.) (26 October 1987), col. 34).

Rambo also appears in an ethnographic study of the disarmament of the pro-government *kamajor* militia in Sierra Leone. Danny Hoffman (2005, 339) observes how in his "interviews with combatants, young fighters found evidence of a *kamajor*'s ability to repel bullets and survive overwhelming combat assaults in the legendary hunters of the past, but even more so in the cinematic exploits of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger and in the survival story of gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur." Such comparisons here are not meant to analogize the armed groups in this research with armed actors in very different situations. Rather, the transportable implication from such observations is that firearms use is often not just about physical control, but also about normative rationales and framings around the legitimate use of violence. As guns are tied to state service and were frequently limited by citizenship, not just in the US, the social 'status' of arms is in some ways inseparable from their use.

Understanding how the symbolism and 'status' of firearms operates between and within cultural contexts is especially important given the proliferation of small firearms is a worldwide, rather than US-specific concern, especially following the Cold War (cf. Pereira 2003, 388). Globally, civilians possess more small firearms than military and state enforcement agencies. The 2018 Small Arms Survey estimated that in 2017 around 85 percent of the world's small arms were in civilian hands, compared to only 13 percent in military arsenals, and 2 percent with law enforcement.²⁴² As Charles Springwood (2007, 18) summarizes: "small arms are prolific because they are relatively cheap, and they are paramount in virtually all wars between nation-states . . . they are not technologically complex, and they are durable . . . portable, often easy to conceal, and thus, easy to smuggle."

These observations are not meant to imply that civilians are better armed than state forces, but rather that cheap, accessible, and easily concealable weapons inevitably shift how governments and actors respond to private violence and gun use. In short, guns are useful for rebels and gangs, but as this research demonstrates, these are not the only actors taking up arms. As Carlson (2014, 343) notes, "vignettes from the USA, South

²⁴² See Small Arms Survey (2020): "The Small Arms Survey estimates that of the one billion firearms in global circulation as of 2017, 857 million (85 percent) are in civilian hands, 133 million (13 percent) are in military arsenals, and 23 million (2 percent) are owned by law enforcement agencies. Our studies suggest that the global stockpile has increased over the past decade, largely due to civilian holdings, which grew from 650 million in 2006 to 857 million in 2017."

Africa and India suggest that in some societies, individuals are increasingly participating in kinds of power usually reserved for the state: gun-toters use their guns (or prepare to use them) for exceptional circumstances in which questions of life and death, friend and enemy, must be decided.”

Fourth, the Militia Movement and gun ownership is often subsumed into structural explanations of right-wing mobilization, such as the Tea Party, Republican electorates, and far-right ethnonationalist and populist surges across history (cf. Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 33-34; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 295-297; Belew 2018, 192-239; Bennett 1995). The membership base of militias overlaps with many right-wing social movements, and unsurprisingly, the proposed causal roots of militias match many contemporary hypotheses around the global 'rightist' or 'populist' turn in 'Western' democracies (cf. Berman 2021).

This case study of US militia members offers compelling parallels and implications for how citizens form political beliefs and engage in democratic decision-making. Contemporary political research on symbolic or effective politics (cf. Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017; Mettler 2011), as well as the social dimensions of class and geography (cf. Cramer 2016; Gallaher 2004, 2002), all point toward the need for deeper understandings of how actors' experiences and worldviews shape political behavior beyond structural incentives. While white male breadwinner identity is a salient frame in this research, actors' accounts here suggest political distrust may also play a role in far-right political behavior, especially if we broaden political trust to include assessments of government institutions and procedural justice (cf. Lamprianou and Ellinas 2017, 45-46; Schlipphak 2021; Klandermans 2013, 5-6).

Just as prior scholarship suggests political distrust contributes to sentiments that government is no longer an equitable, beneficial, or efficient distributor of social resources (cf. Hetherington 2005; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Jiobu and Curry 2001), my research suggests political distrust may be related to perceptions that government is also not an equitable, beneficial, or efficient organizer of internal security. Critically, in short, this study shows how distrust may help explain varied behavioral outcomes and mechanisms that lead to political action, including the emotional rewards actors perceive from participation. It is not that socioeconomic resentment does not matter; it is that more often the positionality of the ingroup matters more than the fluctuating contours of imagined 'outgroups.' As governments play active roles in constructing and institutionalizing collective identities, it should be of little

surprise that actors can also see such categories as prone to political manipulation, as well as available for their own instrumentalization. The systemic forces of white supremacy operate, in other words, through institutions and political elites as much as through ground-level actors. Beyond these theoretical implications, this research offers several important takeaways for gun regulation efforts in the United States.

III. Policy Suggestions

As Charles Tilly (1992, 69) notes about the US divergence from European models of gun control: “Since the seventeenth century, nevertheless, rulers . . . have made it criminal, unpopular, and impractical for most of their citizens to bear arms, have outlawed private armies, and have made it seem normal for armed agents of the state to confront unarmed civilians. By clinging to civilian possession of firearms, the US now sets itself apart from all other Western countries, and pays the price . . .” Existing US gun laws are clearly inadequate at preventing mass shooting events and high rates of gun suicides, and political scholarship continues to ask why gun regulation fails despite being supported by a majority of Americans (cf. Goss 2006). This research suggests policymakers take away at least three lessons to move the public debate forward:

1. *Reestablish political trust and engage grassroots activists in policymaking:* First, levels of trust in political elites, policymaking, and electoral processes appear crucially important in this research. These observations are even more relevant in light of the 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol. While this research does not capture the extreme distrust of January 6 actors, gun users in this sample demonstrated high levels of tangible and generalized distrust in political elites and policymaking. Similarly, the recent non-partisan surges in gun purchases during the Covid-19 pandemic and following nationwide police brutality protests further point to a relationship between firearms ownership and levels of institutional, political, and social trust (cf. Lang and Lang 2021; Warner and Ratcliff 2021, 331-332; Schaeffer 2021; Burnett 2020; McLaughlin and Fares 2020; Schleimer et al. 2021).²⁴³ Reestablishing political trust is a massive undertaking that will require varied strategies for different constituencies, and is too broad to address here. However, an important observation from interviews is that my participants were just as distrustful of the National Rifle Association as they were of politicians. As militia member Rob (ODF:1793091) tells me, “I used to be a member of the NRA. Not anymore. They’ve become just another talking head.” This research suggests that policymaking

²⁴³ For instance, Lang and Lang (2020, 153-154) document spikes in background check applications for gun purchases during March and June 2020, and Schleimer et al. (2021, 7) estimate “a nationwide excess of 4.3 million firearm purchases from March through July 2020.”

committees and roundtables on gun regulation should seek to engage or measure the attitudes of more grassroots gun rights activists, while working to reduce pressures from the NRA and the firearms industry. If the goal is to find non-partisan consensus between gun owners and gun control advocates, polling suggests there is much room for compromise beyond lobbying groups, even while some issues remain divisive (cf. Goss 2006, 5; Smith 1980; Gallup n.d.; Kennett and Anderson 1976, 237-38; Parker et al. 2017, 11-12; Wright, Rossi, and Daly 1983, 2). Easy wins with broad agreement, such as requiring background checks for private sales, implementing waiting periods, mandating permits for concealed carry, and restricting access to expanded classes, can help establish initial trust and dialogue for harder conversations. It is also worth bearing in mind that gun owners are estimated to be a minority of the US population, albeit a substantive and vocal one, at somewhere between 20 to 40 percent (cf. Warner and Ratcliff 2021, 331; Schaeffer 2021; Saad 2020; Azrael et al. 2017). More importantly, analysis here confirms how public attitudes on gun control are not static and can be swayed by policy framings, popular discourse, and political will (cf. Schaeffer 2021; Haag 2016; Goss 2006).

2. *Reframe the gun control debate:* Second, gun activists are quite right when they observe that there is sometimes an almost unreasonable fear of guns as objects that cause violence. Indeed, in media discussions of armed groups much sensationalism is derived simply from the collective use of guns, whether these actors are retired white males shooting targets in the woods, or a group of leftist millennials organizing a weekly range night. It is not that individuals with politically violent intentions could not very well be doing the same thing, it is that not everyone practicing arms training is doing so with politically violent aims. Much discussion of gun control has shifted to public health discourse in an attempt to remove the normative charge of gun ownership from the policy conversation (cf. Kohn 2004, 132-136; Spitzer 2004, 43). While admirable, these debates unfortunately often revolve around restricting gun access without acknowledging the underlying socioeconomic and mental health issues that lead to the majority of US gun fatalities. At the same time, as I discuss in the next takeaway, removing the normative lens from firearms ownership obfuscates how owners and the general public actually think about and use firearms. The fact that guns are designed with the intention to kill, and to do so efficiently, is one that gun users and gun control advocates understand in markedly different ways. For some individuals who have never handled firearms, guns can be terrifying objects intended only for violent purposes, even if they are only ever used for sport. In contrast, gun users can view firearms as overly mundane tools, analogizing handguns to fire extinguishers or wrenches in ways that remove debate over the deadly costs of private ownership. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, part of what accounts for these divergent worldviews is simply whether individuals have prior exposure to firearms. Bridging the life experiences of individuals across the US requires policymakers take time to understand how gun owners interpret their own gun use, as well as the variation in gun owner positionalities on the ground.

3. *Acknowledge legacies of white supremacy in gun control and policing:* Third, gun ownership rights in the US rest on the foundations of white supremacy, a systemic national bias that continues to sow division and undermine the democratic justice promised in America's national ethos. While legal ownership is no longer restricted by race, bias remains in the application of self-defense laws, as well as in the disproportionate and heavy-handed policing of Black and Brown gun users. Some of the first contemporary gun control measures arose in response to the formation of the Black Panthers, who were viewed as threatening, rather than patriotic, when Huey P. Newton lifted a gun above his head in reference to the "classic imagery of the 1776 revolutionary militiamen" (Nascimento 2007, 15). The presence of normative cultural archetypes around shooters—the criminal 'other,' cowboy, vigilante, warrior—have tangible implications on the ground. Within the US system of racial dominance, these frames are constraining and deadly for those imagined as 'others,' and continue to pose challenges to a racial reckoning. Pragmatically, the presence of explicit and documented white supremacy within pockets of policing and the US armed services requires systematic confrontation and accountability (cf. German 2020; De Luce 2021; Kennard 2015; Belew 2018). Systemic distrust of police is based in tangible evidence of brutality, abuse, bias, and corruption, all of which must be addressed before citizens will consider disarming. Second, and more granularly, one of the surprising findings of this research was the practice of both government and police departments selling surplus arms to the public, including guns seized in crimes (Stephens 2017; Bellisle 2018; Vobejda, Ottaway, and Cohen 1999; Olinger 1999; O'Connell and Barrett 1999; DeConde 2001, 288; Meier 1999). As regulations on police weapon sales vary by state, an immediate way to control the growth of the gun stock would be to federally require seized firearms to be destroyed, rather than sold to supplement law enforcement budgets.

IV. Further Research

What this study cannot address is how and when defensive armed action transforms into political violence. Research on armed politics across contexts consistently demonstrates that groups and actors constantly adapt to dynamic political circumstances, shifting their allegiances with government, their reasons for action, and their accepted repertoires of action (cf. Carey and Mitchell 2017; Staniland 2015, 2017; Windisch, Ligon, and Simi 2019). The high levels of political distrust among my participants did not translate into these actors joining the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol. Why is it that some militias viewed the 2020 election as a cause for action and others did not? Research here suggests some answers might be found in explicitly fundamentalist, conspiracist, and ethnonationalist frames.

Understanding how distrust relates to collective blame, and when and why it is placed on elites, individuals, or social outgroups, remains an unresolved puzzle in political behavior studies. The documented increasing skepticism of authoritative knowledge and ‘politicization of fact’ further harkens to the need for qualitative engagement at the actor level to explain how and why actors believe certain truths over others, and decide to act on these beliefs (Allina-Pisano 2009, 54). Given this study’s focus on nonviolent armed groups, however, more questions were raised about these violent counterparts than answered.

While it is difficult to interview actively violent individuals, a comparison study of contemporary armed groups with divergent outcomes to the actors in this research, such as the Michigan Wolverine Watchmen, might offer answers. Overall, this study illustrates how research on the ‘far-right’ or ‘extreme’ movements and political violence benefits from: considering how actors’ beliefs relate to wider political discourses; investigating similar demographics with the same beliefs who engage in different behavioral outcomes; and sampling actors with divergent positionalities (cf. Jensen, Seate, and James 2020; Keatley and Marono 2021; Ahmed and Lynch 2021; Doering, Davies, and Corrado 2020, 2-3).

Second, all of my participants were gun owners before the reported surge in firearms purchases during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is not surprising given reports that 2020 sales may have been driven by new owners from non-traditional gun demographics such as women and communities of color (cf. McLaughlin and Fares 2020; Lang and Lang 2021, 157-158). While I was able to sample demographics traditionally underrepresented in gun research, including queer, transgender, and nonbinary individuals, this study was unfortunately unable to sample from a growing number of BIPOC armed groups, such as the Huey P. Newton Gun Club and the Latino Rifle Association. Do these groups distrust government and appear to mobilize for similar service-oriented rewards as their armed peers?

Overall, this research argues that only through understanding the substantive political meaning armed defense holds for activists can we begin to identify why certain structural variables are more or less likely to predict the rise, success, and shape of more local and non-traditional forms of political activism. As demonstrated in the long history of scholarship on revolution and political action, objective inequalities do not translate to action without an understanding of existing conditions as unjust, and an ability to mobilize collectively (cf. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 40-41; McAdam

1999, 33-34; Auyero 2009; Scott 1985). Thus, objective ‘grievances’ abound, oppressed groups do not rise up, and scholars attempt to explain why some actors appear quiescent in the face of suffering while others do not.

Threat in this research is similarly shown to be socially constructed and defined by political discourse that not only frames how actors interpret the present, but also, and more importantly, how actors anticipate the future. Only through perceptions of potential exigencies and future violence can my actors come to see armed defense as a service on behalf of others. Myths around virtuous white and heteronormative gun use are constructed by government and ever present in popular imaginings, but these narratives are neither unchanging nor uncontested. In presenting an ‘unexceptional’ case of US gun culture as a legacy of institutional arrangements, I have sought to unravel the apparently exceptional ‘altruism’ of contemporary armed group members. This research illustrates how understanding the worldviews of armed actors from varied positionalities can help explain how perceptions of threat and distrust not only interact with socioeconomic grievances and resentment, but also can create new reasons and rewards for political action.

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following list reflects the final iteration of questions asked to participants, including related prompts. As discussed in the Introduction to this research, these questions were developed not only from prior scholarship and national surveys, but also evolved iteratively over the course of fieldwork. Given these were semi-structured interviews, questions below may not always reflect the exact wording, order, or full extent of questions on a topic asked in interviews.

Community and Political Engagement

1. To start, tell me a bit about yourself: Where do you live and what is the community like where you live and/or work? (e.g., *urban/rural, industrial, diverse, welcoming, closed-off, etc.*)
2. How active are you in your community (or were you prior to the Covid-19 pandemic)? (e.g., *service organizations, social clubs, church groups, neighborhood councils, etc.*)
3. Have you ever voiced your opinion to your local, state, or national government? *If so, how, and what was the response?*
4. Do you tend to vote in primaries and general elections? *Do you tend to vote in all local, state, and national elections, just a few, or not at all?*
5. Have you ever participated in a protest? *If yes, do you mind sharing a recent or past memorable example(s)?*

Covid-19/Coronavirus Pandemic

1. Do you agree with your state government's responses to Covid-19? Why or why not?
2. Has your opinion of government changed at all during the Covid-19 crisis? Why or why not?
3. Have you purchased any firearms since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (since Feb/March 2020)? *Do you mind describing the purchase (e.g., whether bought online or in-person, reasons, etc.)?*
4. How have you and/or your family been affected by Covid-19 (e.g., *health, unemployment, etc.*)?

Politics

1. What do you think are the major issues facing people in your state these days (aside from the current Covid-19 pandemic/health crisis)? What about the United States as a whole?
2. Do your local and state governments do a good job? (*Where does government let down your community the most? Where does government help your community the most?*)
3. What about local and state police, law enforcement, and justice systems – do they do a good job in your community/state?
4. Do you trust national politicians?
5. What about state and local politicians?
6. Do you feel any political parties represent your views? Which one(s) (if any)? *Why or why not?*
7. Overall, do you feel the United States is moving in the right direction (aside from Covid-19)?

Economy

1. Do you think that your community is doing better or worse economically than other people in your state and/or the US?
2. Do you feel that you are better or worse off than others in your community?
3. Are you optimistic about the economic future of your community?

Guns and Gun Rights

1. How were you first introduced to guns or shooting?
2. Do you remember about how old you were when you first fired a gun?
3. Do you think it is important to own guns? Why?
4. What does the Second Amendment mean to you? Is it important?
5. Do you own any guns? If so, about how many do you own and what types (*e.g., handguns, rifles, antiques, etc.*)?
6. Do you hold any active (or lapsed) weapons permits? Which ones?

7. Do you have a favorite gun? Which one and why?
8. How frequently do you go shooting? (e.g., *Do you visit an indoor range? How often do you go hunting? etc.*)
9. Who should own a gun?
10. Should there be any restrictions on gun ownership? What types of restrictions are a good and/or bad idea? (e.g., *do you support 'constitutional carry', certain types of background checks, 'red flag' laws, etc.?*)

Arms Training, Gun Groups, and/or Community Defense Group Membership

1. Are you or have you been a member of an arms training or community defense group? Can you tell me a bit more about your group(s)?
2. Why did you want to join your group?
3. When did you first join your group and how long have you been (or were you) an active member of your group?
4. How did you find out about your group?
5. Why do you think groups like yours are important?
6. How active is (or was) your group? (e.g., *about how often does/did the group meet, do you meet socially outside official meetings, etc.*)
7. How would you describe your role in your group (e.g., *leadership, officer positions, etc.*)?
8. What are your favorite parts of membership?
9. What do most people not understand about groups like yours?
10. Is there a certain age range or demographic you think is overrepresented or underrepresented in your membership? *If comfortable, do you mind sharing about how large your group is in terms of membership?*
11. If you are no longer active in a group, why did you decide to leave or stop participating?

Media and News

1. What information and media sources do you trust most for news? (e.g., *TV, radio, internet, newspapers, social media/Twitter, friends, apps, etc.*)
2. How frequently do you read, watch, or listen to the news?
3. Do you feel you are more or less informed on politics than your friends and family?

Background and Demographic Data

1. What is your age?
2. What is your set of personal pronouns/do you identify with any genders? (*For some militia interviews this question was framed in traditional gender binaries.*)
3. Do you identify with any races and/or ethnicities?
4. What is your current town/city or state of residence? Have you lived other places for significant periods of time?
5. Do you have any children? How many?
6. What is your marital/relationship status?
7. Do you practice any religion or hold any spiritual or religious beliefs?
8. What kind of work do you do (or did you do before the Covid-19 pandemic or retirement)? How long have you/did you work in this field?
9. Have you ever been a member of a union? Which one(s)?
10. Do you have any educational degrees or professional certifications?
11. Do you have any prior military experience? Would you mind sharing the length of time of your service, rank, branch, areas deployed, etc.

Appendix 2: Interview Details

This appendix presents details of formal interviews conducted with armed group members (Table A2.1), and pilot interviews (Table A2.2).

TABLE A2.1. Interviews with armed group members

	Date of interview*	Pseudonym	Armed group	State	Format	Length (mins)
1	Feb. 21, 2019	Brain, he/him (4831771)	Kentucky III%/ Kentucky State Militia (recruit)	KY	In-person (multiple)	90
2	Aug. 13, 2019	Robert, he/him (1793091)	Ohio Defense Force	OH	Phone	182
3	Sept. 16, 2019	David, he/him (1342898)	Kentucky Defenders of Liberty Militia	KY	Phone	98
4	Sept. 29, 2019	Matthew, he/him (4359402)	East Kentucky Militia	KY	Phone	47
5	March 13, 2020	Joshua, he/him (1768333)	West Virginia Militia	WV	Phone	154
6	Sept. 1, 2020	Jeffrey, he/him (2867389)	Anonymized leftist defense group	KY	In-person	90
7	September 25, 2020	Tyler, he/him (2911613)	Socialist Rifle Association	PA	Written	--
8	October 14, 2020	Jacob, he/him (3309261)	Socialist Rifle Association	WI	Video Conference	144
9	December 15, 2020	Kenneth, he/him (1806143)	Pennsylvania Light Foot Militia	PA	Phone	41
10	February 17, 2021	Justin, he/him (4659213)	Pink Pistols	GA	Video	90
11	July 2, 2021	Shawn, he/him (2986463)	Arizona SRA	AZ	Written	--
12	February 26, 2021	Paul, he/him (4489478)	Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership	ANON	Video Conference	82
13	May 8, 2021	Adam, he/him (2114037)	Anonymized militia group	PA	Written and messaging	--

14	July 6, 2021	Steven, he/him (4907149)	Georgia SRA	GA	Written and video conference	60
15	July 16, 2021	Andrew, he/him (2170513)	Watchmen	NC	Written and recorded video	--
16	August 7, 2021	Michael, he/him (1140182)	Louisiana Pink Pistols	LA	Written and messaging	--
17	August 11, 2021	Brandon, he/him (1894948)	Anonymized leftist defense group	FL	Written and messaging	--
18	August 19, 2021	Texas Militia (Collective response)	Texas Militia	TX	Written and messaging	--
19	August 20, 2021	Hunter, he/him (3354245)	Texas State Militia	TX	Written and messaging	--
20	August 21, 2021	Charles, he/him (1080165)	Virginia Oath Keepers	VA	Written	--
21	August 29, 2021	Jamie, they/them (2874603)	John Brown Gun Club	ANON	Written and messaging	--
22	September 13, 2021	Zach, he/him (3028541)	Anonymized leftist defense group	FL	Written and messaging	--
23	September 20, 2021	Collective response	Orange County, California SRA	CA	Written	--
24	October 3, 2021	Nicole, she/her (2979846)	National African American Gun Association	South	Written and messaging	--
25	October 8, 20201	Anonymized socialist firearm education organization (collective)	Southwest	ANON	Written	--
26	October 12, 2021	Nicholas, he/him (2910720)	Pink Pistols	MA	Written	--
27	October 14, 2021	William, he/him (1390238)	John Brown Gun Club	ANON	Written (survey distributed by group)	--
28	October 17, 2021	Alex, they/them (4770945)	John Brown Gun Club	ANON	Written (survey distributed by group)	--
29	November 3, 2021	James, he/him (3469228)	Liberal Gun Club	OH	Phone	31
30	December 7, 2021	Taylor, they/them (4958846)	Socialist Rifle Association	MI	Written and messaging	--

						(survey distributed by group)
31	December 7, 2021	Jordan, they/them (4572657)	Socialist Rifle Association	MI	Written	--
32	December 26, 2021	Joseph, he/him (3753342)	Anonymized militia	TN	Written and messaging	--

* For participants I interviewed more than once, data reflects the date of the first interview or the longest/primary interaction. ANON stands for anonymized to protect participant anonymity.

TABLE A2.2. Pilot interviews

	Date of interview	Pseudonym*	Political affiliation, gun owner	State	Format	Length (mins)
1	Feb. 27, 2019	he/him, (6403490)	Independent, gun owner	KY	Phone	80
2	Feb. 27, 2019	he/him (3567268)	Democrat, veteran, gun owner	KY	In-person	30
3	Jan. 7, 2019	he/him 1486029	Democrat, gun owner	KY	In-person	90
4	Multiple dates in 2019	Tom, he/him (1758297)	Sovereign Citizen, non-gun owner	KY	In-person	45
5	April 26, 2019	Jason, he/him (4754458)	Republican, gun owner	KY	In-person	60
6	July 7, 2019	he/him (1643670)	Republican, veteran, gun owner	KY	In-person	210
7	July 25, 2019	he/him (2219988)	Republican, veteran, gun owner	KY	In-person	30
8	July 25, 2019	he/him (4092595)	Independent, veteran, gun owner	KY	In-person	30
9	July 25, 2019	he/him (4318337)	Independent, veteran, gun owner	KY	In-person	30
10	August 9, 2019	he/him (3425170)	Republican, gun owner	KY	Phone	71
11	Aug. 23, 2019	Daniel, he/him (3864133)	Republican, firearms trainer	KY	Phone	109
12	Aug. 31, 2019	he/him (1571314)	Democrat, gun owner	KY	Phone	102
13	July 31, 2021	he/him (3938644)	Socialist organizer, non-gun owner	West	Phone	90

* I only assign pseudonyms to those directly cited in this text. For the remainder I report preferred pronouns.

Appendix 3: Documentation of Online and Graphic References

This appendix offers additional graphic documentation of key references and sources in this text. Citations make reference to Appendix 3 where relevant. Sources are presented in the order they appear in text and by chapter.

Chapter 2 Documentation

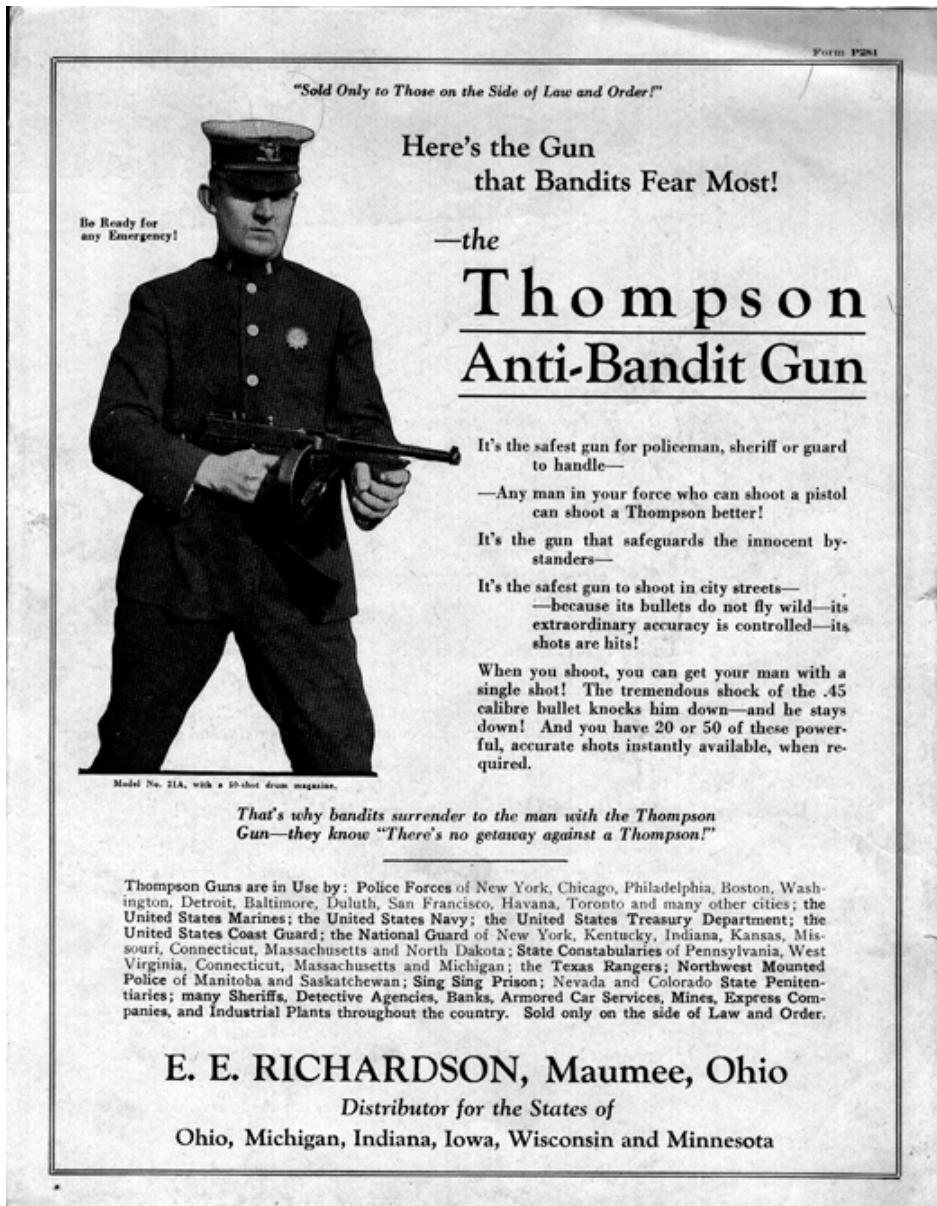


FIGURE A3.1. Tommy Gun Advertisement

"Front Cover of a brochure selling Thompsons in the 1920s."

Source unknown. Public Commons. Reproduced on May 1, 2022 from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thompsonad1sm.jpg#filehistory>.



FIGURE A3.2. Gendered gun marketing, Gun Goddess

Screenshot of Gun Goddess homepage taken March 9, 2021 at <https://www.gungoddess.com>.

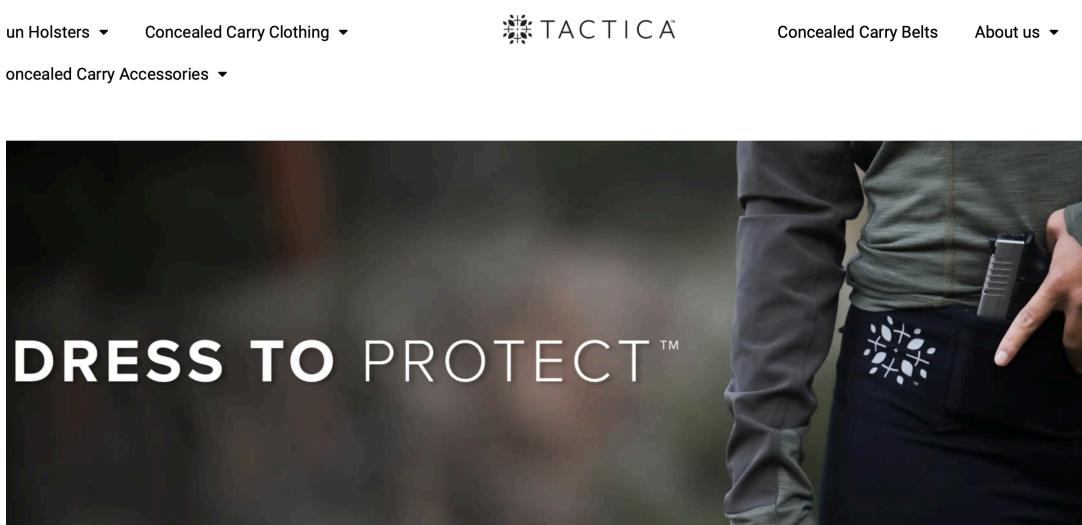


FIGURE A3.3. Gendered gun marketing, Tactica

Screenshot of Tactica Defense Fashion homepage taken March 9, 2021 at <https://tacticafashion.com>. Text on homepage copied on May 11, 2022 reads: "It's time to spice up the season with fresh fashion and warm protective clothes. To help you conceal your firearm while you dress to impress, we've created a collection of apparel specifically designed for concealed carry for women and to give you quick access to your firearm. From athletic wear, to professional styles, to casual and outdoor pieces, you'll fall in love with your newly revived wardrobe. Rich, lively colors add flare to your daily look, and secret concealed carry pockets allow you to conceal your firearm with confidence."

Chapter 3 - Gallup Gun Owner Survey (Saad 2020)

National gun owner survey data from Gallup (Saad 2020) used in Chapter 3 may be updated after submission of this research. November 13, 2020 Gallup data below is from a screenshot taken on April 24, 2022 (Saad 2020).

Gun Ownership in the U.S., 2020			
	Personally own a gun	Live in gun household	Number of interviews
	%	%	
U.S. adults	32	44	1,035
Gender			
Men	45	51	530
Women	19	35	505
Age			
18-29	22	38	129
30-49	35	45	244
50-64	32	45	291
65+	36	48	357
Education			
Postgraduate	26	36	225
College graduate only	35	50	250
Some college	34	48	329
No college	31	41	219
Household income			
\$100,000+	38	55	296
\$40,000 to <\$100,000	34	51	371
<\$40,000	25	31	270
Race/Ethnicity			
White (non-Hispanic)	38	51	768
Non-White	18	28	246
Region			
East	21	28	212
Midwest	34	50	214
South	40	53	368
West	26	38	241
Type of community			
Big/Small city	23	32	364
Suburb of big/small city	25	41	293
Town/Rural area	48	61	344
Marital status			
Married	38	52	541
Not married	25	36	465
Children			
Have child under 18	36	48	229
No child under 18	30	42	781
Party ID			
Republican	50	64	325
Independent	29	39	370
Democrat	18	31	314
Ideology			
Conservative	45	57	377
Moderate	29	41	364
Liberal	15	30	267
Questions: Do you have a gun in your home? (Asked of those who do not have a gun in their home.) Do you have a gun anywhere else on your property such as in your garage, barn, shed or in your car or truck? (Asked of those who have a gun in their home or on their property.) Do you personally own a gun, or do the gun or guns in your household belong to another household member?			
GALLUP, SEPT. 30-OCT. 15, 2020			

Chapter 4 - Primary Social Media Sources

Chapter 4 references several social media and website posts. Relevant documentation is provided below.

Alabama Outlaw Militia Facebook Post

I initially started my survey of armed group rhetoric by capturing the text on the social media pages of every group I contacted for an interview. This is provided below. I began to take screenshots at later dates, and while using different platforms (e.g., Instagram). While I do not have a screenshot of this defunct Facebook page, anti-Muslim sentiment similar and more vitriolic than that captured below is well documented in other militia groups and Donald Trump supporters (cf. Shanmugasundaram 2018; Mannette 2018; Hawley 2019).

The full text of the ‘About’ description was copied on May 23, 2018 from the Alabama Outlaw Militia Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Alabama-Outlaw-Militia-266819816820565/>:

“This organization was put together to help protect our families and community in case of natural disasters such as hurricanes and to protect our families and communities against enemies foreign and domestic such as street gangs, tyrant law enforcement and a tyrant government. We are a family orientated group, friends and family are always welcome. This is not a racist group all races are welcome. We do believe in protecting our southern culture and heritage. We do not recognize the federal government as our own, We remain loyal to the Confederate States of America. If you think that is racist you need a history lesson. Men of many races and religions fraught under the Confederate battle flag including free black men. As far as religion goes to each his own but I can't promise your safety if you pull out a rug and get on your knees and start mumbling shit about allah lol. Our beliefs are pretty much summed up by the saying "don't start no shit and there won't be no shit". We are a peaceful group but if someone has intent to do us any harm or try to take what is ours we will go to their front door and we will bring hell with us. Our goal is to build not only a militia but also a family of good people that you can count on if anything ever happens. As far as age and health goes there are plenty of things to be done so we will find a spot for you. If there is anything specific you would like to know feel free to ask.”

Redacted Instagram Screenshot

Anonymized leftist defense group, Instagram post, January 27, 2022. Screenshot taken April 26, 2022 and redacted to protect participant anonymity.



[REDACTED] Range day essentials: IFAK and the knowledge of how to use one. Training with guns has inherent dangers!

Mitigate those dangers as much as possible with medical training and supplies.

#firearms #firearmstraining #tactical #tacticalgear
#tacticaltraining #gunsofinstagram #tourniquet
#stopthebleed #tccc #ifak #medic #firstaid #trauma
#tacticalmedicine #combatmedic #tecc
#riotmedicine #streetmedic #streetmedicine

[REDACTED] comments

27 January

Appendix 4: VAOK Talking Points and Code of Conduct

The document below was sent to the author by the Virginia Oath Keepers. It is reprinted here given the public-facing nature of its content. Rights and permissions remain with VAOK for any future reproduction and attribution.

VAOK Talking Points

To address questions and misconceptions about the Virginia Oath Keepers

1. POINT: Who are we? Virginia Oath Keepers comprise former and active duty military, law enforcement, first responders and American patriots who have taken an oath to protect the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

To do this we have adopted the following missions:

Home Guard – to train and prepare to meet natural or man-made disasters with security, supplies and skills.

Public Awareness – through deeds and actions, to instill patriotism, support for one another and respect for the Constitution of the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Checks and Balances – to hold accountable local, state and Federal officials and governments, appointed and elected, ensuring their actions and performance are in line with the Constitution. We will accomplish this mission through petition, ballots, discussion and the dissemination of information.

2. POINT: Who we are not. The Virginia Oath Keepers is not a militia. The National Militia Act of 1903 defines an organized militia as a military force that is raised from the civil population to supplement a regular army in an emergency, and an unorganized militia as every able-bodied man of at least 17 and under 45 years of age, not a member of the State Guard or Naval Militia.

We are, however, prepared, when requested, to support state and local authorities during natural or man-made disasters.

We train to support each other and our communities should law and order break down, regardless of the reason.

3. POINT: Who we are not. The VAOK is not a group of white supremacists. Our belief in the Constitution ensures our respect for all citizens. The Constitution's first three words—*We the People*—affirm that the government of the United States exists to serve all its citizens.

The VAOK Code of Conduct specifies the respect of all members, regardless of race, creed, or religion.

4. POINT: Does the VAOK support the Second Amendment to the Constitution?
We have sworn to uphold all of the seven Articles and 27 Amendments of the United States Constitution.

5. POINT: Is the VAOK organization affiliated with the National Oath Keepers and Stuart Rhodes?

No. The Virginia Oath Keepers is not affiliated with or linked to the *Oath Keepers* group founded by Stuart Rhodes.

6. POINT: National *Oath Keepers* have volunteered to guard schools against external threats. Will the VAOK participate?

The **Virginia Oath Keepers** is deeply saddened by these types of events, and we, as mothers and fathers, feel the need to protect our children. We are not, however, compelled to take it upon ourselves to guard our schools in Virginia.

Our organization has many present and prior military, law enforcement, and first responders familiar with a variety of weapons and tactics, and we would certainly respond to a request *from the proper authorities* at the state or local level to support activities that would help to ensure the safety of every citizen of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

7. POINT: What is the core principle of the VAOK?

Defending the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. We train to be vigilant and prepared for this defense. We train to respond, when called on, to provide logistics, medical, infrastructure and protective support in our communities and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

8. POINT: Is the VAOK a political organization? Based on an often used and accepted definition of politics – “the activities of the government, members of law-making organizations, *or people* who try to influence the way a country is governed, or a person's opinions about the management of government,” – VAOK is not political.

As a part of our mission, Check and Balances, we are an organization ***concerned*** about the activities of government and law-making organizations. If we, as an organization, perceive a deviation from the Constitution, it is our duty through petition, ballots, discussion and the broad dissemination of information to provide these checks and balances.

Note: The origin of the word “**politics**” comes from Greek, and means “affairs of the city.” The VAOK is certainly concerned with the affairs of all levels of government from our communities to the Federal government.

Virginia Oath Keepers Code of Conduct

To ensure that the Organization is always protected against negative publicity and/or legal action, and to ensure that the preservation of our prestige and reputation is always at the forefront of any actions or behavior on the part of all members, each member of Virginia Oath Keepers agrees to the following conditions:

1. Members will respect the personal dignity of all members, and conduct themselves in a courteous and lawful manner at all times when representing Virginia Oath Keepers.
2. Members will be honest and truthful, avoid deception, and will never engage in slander of any member, or threaten any member in word or deed.
3. Members will work together to create good personal reputations, that reflect honesty, integrity, and mutual respect.
4. Members will familiarize themselves with the Bylaws and the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) of the Virginia Oath Keepers and will act in accordance with such. Any member who is engaged in activities that are outside of the Virginia Oath Keepers mission must not wear any VAOK logos or use any pamphlets, banners, stickers, web links or any other reference to Virginia Oath Keepers that would suggest that said activities are sanctioned by and involve participation or collaboration with Virginia Oath Keepers.
5. Members will understand their actions reflect on Virginia Oath Keepers and be accountable for all choices made of their own free will.
6. Members will adhere to all applicable rules, regulations, Bylaws and Standard Operating Procedures of Virginia Oath Keepers.
7. All members will respect the votes, actions and recommendation of the Board of Directors. Board of Directors will respect the members right to appeal any action taken by the Board of Directors, and will work cooperatively with members to resolve differences, in accordance with SOP and/or specified in the Bylaws.
8. All Virginia Oath Keepers Members will practice high moral and ethical standards and integrity for continued membership in Virginia Oath Keepers.

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