

## IDEAS

# Trump Is the Glue That Binds the Far Right

An analysis of 30,000 Twitter accounts provides a map of online extremists—and reveals that support for Trump is what holds them together.

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**J.M. Berger**

Author of *Extremism*



ANDREW HARNICK / AP

Last week began with a wave of mail bombs sent to the enemies of President Donald Trump and ended with the massacre of 11 people at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. In between, a racially motivated shooter in Kentucky killed two African Americans. That incident received relatively little coverage, primarily because a locked door prevented the perpetrator from killing even more people at a nearby black church.

In the wake of these attacks, America collectively returned to the all-too-familiar ritual of crawling through each perpetrator's paper trail and social-media footprint, looking for the ideological bread crumbs that might explain their actions.

Relatively little has emerged about the Kentucky murderer's beliefs and motives, although his actions and words at the scene are clear enough to establish a racial basis for the attack. In Pittsburgh, the alleged killer was a committed neo-Nazi with

a presence on gab.com, the alt-right social network. And the mail-bomb suspect, Cesar Sayoc, blazed a verbose trail on social media, not explicitly identifying himself with a specific extremist movement but invoking a host of conspiracy theories popular within the American far right.

All three investigations are in their early stages, and additional information may emerge that clarifies each perpetrator's specific influences. But in many ways, there's a clear common thread tying these incidents together. America is caught in a wave of radicalization being driven from the top, by the toxic rhetoric Trump blasts almost daily from the biggest pulpit in the world, the U.S. presidency. His casual invocations of violence and consistent demonization of his political enemies have opened the floodgates of hate in communities where anger has long simmered.

*[ Adam Serwer: Trump's caravan hysteria led to this. ]*

The landscape behind these attacks is complex, though. They emerge from a collection of far-right factions held in equipoise between cooperation and competition by their shared support for Trump. Understanding these factions can help shed light on what is happening, and what lies ahead for a fractured American body politic.

I recently analyzed about 30,000 Twitter accounts that self-identified as alt-right or followed someone who did, for vox-Pol, the European academic network studying extremism on social media. The results were illuminating.

The alt-right is often described as a movement or an ideology. It is better understood as a political bloc that seeks to unify the activities of several different extremist movements or ideologies. While it is international in reach, its center of gravity is in the United States. Because the alt-right is a bloc, it has to be understood by mapping its components and analyzing how they overlap and how they differ. (Not everyone who associates with the bloc online self-identifies as alt-right.)

**T**he alt-right is overwhelmingly white nationalist. The most influential account included in the data set of alt-right Twitter followers was that of Richard Spencer, the avowed white nationalist who coined the term *alt-right*. Six of the top 20 most influential accounts were owned by white nationalists on Twitter using their real names. (The vox-Pol policy on social-media research discourages the publication of account handles.) Seven more were pseudonymous accounts tweeting primarily about white nationalism. The 12th-most-used hashtag (out of almost 220,000) was #whitegenocide.

But below the top 0.5 percent of users and themes, other metrics pointed to dissonance. A number of different types of nationalist and white-nationalist movements were represented in the network. While all white nationalists identify with *white*, not all identified with the same *nation*, which is one reason to prefer the term *white nationalist* to *white supremacist* in many cases. Many Dutch, Swedish, and Australian accounts were found in the network, as well as many accounts self-identified as white South Africans. These regional movements can have vastly different priorities and hot-button issues while still sharing core racist ideological elements.

[ *Peter Beinart: Trump shut programs to counter violent extremists.* ]

Even within American circles, there were wide variations. Some movements were neo-Nazi or Nazi-nostalgic. Others were associated with the Ku Klux Klan. Many chose to try to camouflage their racism as “race realism,” while others were not concerned with subtlety. While these groups share white supremacy as a core belief, they call for very different tactical approaches and strategic outcomes (ranging from institutionalizing racial preferences to genocide). These differences have historically made it difficult for American white nationalists to cooperate with one another, something the alt-right umbrella tries to remedy, with mixed results.

There were also some very notable outliers among the most popular and influential users, whose status was difficult to square with the network’s strong overall orientation to white nationalism. Some of the most retweeted accounts were those of people of color with far-right views. Others were Jewish. Many of the users were people who have explicitly disavowed white nationalism, including some who have disavowed the alt-right label for its association with that movement. Some influential people were associated with the far-right edge of mainstream conservatism.

To fully understand the alt-right, it’s important to move past these competing patterns of belief and look at structural elements that cross ideological lines. This is where the alt-right finds its best opportunities for cohesion. Commonalities shared by a majority of the alt-right’s component movements included:

- **Opposition to immigration or Muslims:** Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hate was endemic in the network, frequently paired with articles from anti-immigrant news sources, which ranked among the most tweeted and retweeted content. Aside from its cynical use as a rhetorical dodge against charges of racism, anti-immigrant rhetoric helped unite white nationalists with other nationalists who

are not overtly concerned with race, including people of color who advanced anti-immigrant views and themes. Anti-Muslim bigotry was not always paired with anti-immigrant themes, but the two traveled together often enough to justify collapsing them into one category.

- **Conspiracy theories:** Accounts for prominent conspiracy websites and their associated personalities ranked among the top influencers. QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory, was the third-most-tweeted hashtag in the data set, although this ranking was exaggerated by coordinated tweeting activity by that theory's adherents. An alternative-news ecosystem was shared by people with sometimes very divergent views.
- **Support for Trump:** This, more than anything else, was the glue that held the alt-right social network together. Support for Trump was shared by virtually all parts of the network and was reflected in nearly every metric, including tabulations of the most followed, most retweeted, and most influential accounts; the most used words in Twitter profiles; and in the top two hashtags (#maga, which outperformed all other hashtags by a wide margin, and #trump).

The alt-right bloc synchronizes activity that starts on the far-right edge of mainstream conservatism and continues through the far reaches of genocidal white supremacy. There are common goals threaded through its various factions, including undermining the purveyors of real information about the world with a barrage of conspiratorial alternatives, eroding support for immigration within multiple demographic groups, and, most visibly, providing political support to Trump.

This provides the movement with an impact and a reach well in excess of what traditional white supremacy can now accomplish, even as it empowers the implementation of nationalist political policies.

This synchronization strategy has contributed to the accomplishment of tangible political goals, to at least some extent, most notably in relation to drumming up support for Trump administration policies and political strategies. But the alt-right umbrella has largely failed to “unite the right,” as seen in the anemic turnout at a recent Washington, D.C., white-nationalist rally.

*[ Julian Zelizer: Trump needs to demilitarize his rhetoric. ]*

Twitter is not a perfect proxy for the alt-right—many users, such as the Pittsburgh shooter, have moved to alternative platforms like Gab—but it provides a practical avenue to sketch out the contours of the movement. For each major cluster of users

in the census data (as defined by their patterns of interaction with one another), I looked at the most common unique hashtags and words used in Twitter bios. In other words, after terms like *MAGA* and *Trump*, which dominated in almost every cluster, what terms indicated a clear ideological bent?

- **Neoreactionary:** The largest distinct cluster of users, by a relatively narrow margin, consisted of neoreactionaries, often abbreviated NRx, a media-shy movement chiefly defined as antidemocratic and pro-autocracy, although like the alt-right itself, NRx encompasses a variety of views. Its chief ideologue claims that he is not a white nationalist, but that he is “not exactly allergic to the stuff.” Users in the data set were more international than other parts of the alt-right, with a significant Swedish presence and a focus on anti-immigrant content. The top hashtag was #NRx, and while some members of the movement disavow white nationalism directly, #whitegenocide ranked 13th out of more than 4,000 hashtags used in the cluster.
- **Neo-Nazi:** The second-largest cluster consisted of people using neo-Nazi language and self-identifiers such as 14/88. Here, #whitegenocide was the top hashtag, #maga second, and #It’sOkayToBeWhite third.
- **Russian troll influenced:** The third-largest cluster tweeted about Syria more than any other hashtag, with a secondary focus on anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant themes such as #StoptheCaravan. (The data we analyzed were collected earlier this year, so this was a reference to events in April rather than the current right-wing freak-out.) The prominence of Syria hashtags, disproportionately and uncontextually outperforming all other content, strongly suggests this group includes, or was influenced by, Russian-troll activity with respect to U.S. policy on Syria. Various segments of the U.S. far right have strong opinions about Syria, but pro-Assad hashtags in this group dramatically outperformed all others, including #maga. This group also included a significant number of users self-identifying as Identitarian, a European-leaning variant of white nationalism.
- **International white supremacy:** Although American content prevailed in the network, several clusters reflected geographic nodes outside the United States. The largest of these was Australian, where there was no language barrier to inhibit the formation of social connections, but large clusters were also seen with concentrations in Sweden and the Netherlands. The U.K. was strongly represented in the data set, but users were spread among several different clusters, reflecting closer ideological and individual ties to the U.S. scene.

- **Christian white nationalists:** While those in a subset of the NRx cluster identified themselves as Catholic, others in the same cluster identified themselves as atheist or claimed other religious affiliations. Additionally, the sixth-biggest cluster self-identified as either white nationalist or Christian, or both, in their Twitter profiles. This group was also more likely than any other to self-identify as alt-right. Content from this cluster was strongly pro-Trump and included a disproportionate number of Syria hashtags.
- **Shitposters:** A significant cluster of users appeared to be shitposters—the term applies to people who troll for trolling’s sake, although they may also express ideological views (typically white nationalist). This group tweeted hashtags for #4chan and #8chan, as well as hashtags related to memes. A smaller cluster of users identified with Gamergate, and a significant number of those users employed neo-Nazi terminology.
- **Libertarians and anarchists:** Self-described libertarians and anarchists made up one of the smaller clusters that was still large enough to be noteworthy. These users tweeted primarily about taxes and gun control.
- **The manosphere:** Spread throughout the major clusters were users who identified with various forms of misogynist ideology, including a relatively small number of people self-identifying as incels. The largest of these was Men Going Their Own Way (or MGTOW), a movement opposed to feminism, whose members are encouraged to avoid marriage or serious relationships with women. A significant number of these users fraternized with white supremacists in other clusters or with Gamergaters.
- **Proud Boys:** Only a handful of users in the data set self-identified as Proud Boys, and they were not strongly clustered. This suggests that the activity of the Proud Boys, a discrete organization ideologically similar to other alt-right factions, is more concentrated in its own social networks than in networks overlapping with people who identify as alt-right. However, the relatively small presence of Proud Boys in the data set may also reflect the group’s small size or other factors, such as a focus on operational security. (These data were collected before Twitter’s crackdown on the group.)

This array of factions complicates efforts to talk about the alt-right bloc as a unified entity or ideology, and it also complicates efforts to understand how people are taking inspiration from its activities.

*[ Adam Serwer: The cruelty is the point. ]*

While investigations are ongoing in all three of last week's incidents, each terrorist appeared to take a different path toward violence. The alt-right bloc and the movements adjacent to it are just cohesive enough that those who enter their echo chamber can access an à la carte menu of ideological bullet points that are especially attractive to potential lone-actor terrorists. Adherents can pick and choose from a multitude of grievances and conspiracies originating with different ideological strains, and some will emerge with a set of beliefs and influences that may be hard to decipher.

This can be seen most clearly in the case of Sayoc, the suspect in the mail-bomb spree. Sayoc was prolific on social media, but so far his online activity shows a general right-wing orientation, a love of conspiracies, and a baffling claim of nonwhite ethnic identity, while some who knew him offline said he identified as a white supremacist. While more information is likely to emerge, which may change this assessment, Sayoc appears to have availed himself of the à la carte nature of the American far-right landscape, picking and choosing conspiracy theories and hyperpartisan opinions from wherever he encountered them, without locking himself into a specific ideology, except, perhaps, "Trump superfan."

In the case of the deadly synagogue shooting on Saturday, the perpetrator was much more clearly involved with anti-Semitism and the alt-right, maintaining a presence on gab.com, the social network popular with alt-right users because of its relatively permissive environment. Many alt-right members, white nationalists, and other extremists relocated their social-media activity to Gab after being suspended on Twitter or Facebook. Reflecting the à la carte menu of influences available to him, the shooter was cool on Trump (finding him to be too friendly with Jews) but extremely hot on Trump's rhetorical target du jour: the immigrant caravan, which has increasingly dominated the far-right ecosystem in recent days. Trump's perseverations on the issue have created a feedback loop driving still more coverage, in both mainstream and alternative outlets. Whether or not the Pittsburgh shooter was a Trump fan, he was influenced by the consequences of Trump's rhetoric.

In the case of the Kentucky shooter, little is known so far about his path to radicalization, although he appeared to target African Americans and had some history of violence against his African American ex-wife going back some years.

*[ Adam Serwer: Trump's condemnations of violence aren't convincing his supporters. ]*

While these and other incidents over the past two years show variations in their ideological influences, the far-right as a whole has surged during this

period, in both visibility and activity, including violence. Much of this increase can be attributed to the singular common element holding the bloc together—Trump.

It may be that the president lacks a detailed understanding of the factions he unites, although he surely understands that bigotry is crucial to his success. To him, these multifarious groups are simply a part of his “base.” His careful avoidance of further detail serves him well. By neglecting to embrace any one faction, he empowers them all.

With his nativist and anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, Trump is the rising tide that lifts all boats in the sea of right-wing extremism. When he stokes fear about caravans of migrants invading the United States, when he promotes anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about George Soros, when he allows that white supremacists are “very fine people,” when he repeatedly invokes the language of white nationalists and prioritizes their policy preferences, when he demonizes the press as the “enemy of the people,” when he spins conspiracies to obscure his own questionable activities—in all these ways and more, he pours energy and coherence into a movement that might otherwise succumb to its well-established history of infighting.

Trump is holding the rickety structure of the alt-right together, for now and probably for the foreseeable future. When he eventually leaves the public eye, the tottering edifice of the American far right might tip and fall. But for as long as he remains on the scene, it is likely to hold together. And the longer he and his fellow travelers remain in political power, the more likely it is that a more cohesive far-right movement will survive beyond his presidency.

The alt-right contains multitudes. It is a coalition of factions, but it is also an arena. Its social ecosystem, and particularly its online component, provide a venue in which ideas can compete and adherents can flock to the ideological concepts that are most resonant and have staying power. As I have written previously, extremist movements are made up of discrete, identifiable elements, including a definition of identity, the description of a crisis affecting the extremists’ identity group, and a solution to the crisis that requires hostile action against an out-group. Within the alt-right, these elements are like a bag of Lego pieces: Participants in the movement can grab the ideas they like and combine them to create highly personalized ideologies, tailored to their individual preferences.

In addition to fueling lone actors, like those who emerged this week, there is a broader risk. Competition within the far-right arena could end with one cohesive

faction rising to the top and consolidating a leadership role that can outlast Trump. Even more worrisome, a new and more potent ideology could be built from this collection of parts and find success with a wider segment of the population than the alt-right has been able to muster so far.

The end of Trump's unchecked presidency, whether it comes through electoral, political, or constitutional means, will not solve this problem in the near term. In fact, it will probably further consolidate the far right around his personality and leadership, at least temporarily. Almost any imaginable circumstance under which Trump leaves office is likely to coincide with a wave of violence even greater than what we are currently experiencing. This has gone too far; there is no easy way back.

But there is no way back at all that leads through the status quo. The gravitational field of the presidency is unparalleled in U.S. culture—arguably unparalleled in the world. For as long as the center holds, the alt-right's component parts and adjacent movements will continue to be drawn into Trump's orbit, with an increasing sense of empowerment and license to act. Until the tide stops rising, their boats will continue to sail. The past week was just a taste of what that dystopian future could look like.

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