EXTREMISM IN AMERICA: EXPLAINING POLITICAL EXTREMISM USING UNCERTAINTY-IDENTITY THEORY

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Abstract

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Navigating a post-pandemic society, climate-change, political conflict and international wars have become part of most people's daily existence. These crises are sources of societal and personal uncertainty. An effective method of uncertainty reduction comes from people's entrenched group memberships (e.g. nation, political party). Unfortunately, groups with extreme norms and ideologies provide rigid structures that aid in uncertainty reduction. From white nationalists to anti-fascists, the political arena is tumultuous to the point of explosion. These eruptions can be violent, even deadly, and are becoming too familiar and recognizable. Extremism poses both international and domestic threats. There is no nation or society that is safe from the havoc it causes. Understanding the road to supporting and participating in extremist activities is the key to diverting followers onto a safer path. When individuals find themselves uncertain about their identity, the groups to which they belong offer clearly defined roles. The greater the uncertainty, the more desirable a close knit and clearly defined group becomes. Distinct groups with clear boundaries of membership, strong leadership, and explicit values provide individuals with a sense of identity and purpose.

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Introduction

Within the American political sphere lies a more divided and resistant atmosphere than we have had since the Gilded Age, an era known for polarization and open political violence after Reconstruction (DeSilver, 2013). The threat the American people felt during the late 19th century from the major shifts in the status quo and attempts at racial equality sparked a backlash that could be felt for generations. Americans were pushed and pulled deeper into their ideologies, staunchly distancing themselves from their opponents. There was no room for moderation on topics of abolition and states' rights. The efforts of the subjugated population to gain equal rights left those of the establishment feeling threatened and persecuted. The attempts of one group to acknowledge the issues and advance their position was perceived by the other group as a threat. Similarly, the recent calls to restructure policing and acknowledge racial bias in law enforcement was viewed as an attack on police, with the former President shouting the battle cry. As Donald Trump told law enforcement during a White House Round Table, "There won't be defunding. There won't be dismantling of our police. And there's not going to be any disbanding of our police." Each sentence is progressively more extreme than the last. Acknowledging the need for improvement was interpreted as a threat to the system and a threat to the fabric of the American identity. Just as Americans experienced the aftershock of the Civil War, we once again face social, political and cultural challenges and resistances to them.

Both then and now, attempts to acknowledge wrongdoing in the American political sphere sparked defensive and damaging responses; the impact made by

technology cannot be underestimated. It has fueled the divide through increased access to like-minded others. Keyboards and monitors are a gateway to finding a place where radical, extreme, and dangerous views reside. Just like everyone else on social media, our offline interest and activities coincide with what we do online. People with radical and extremist views find vast access to others and expand their network online (Winter et al., 2021). The internet is an international highway that brings people together - some for better and some for worse. While the internet facilitates access to others, it is important to note that it is not the internet that radicalizes individuals, but the behavior of seeking out extremist materials coupled with moral disengagement and petty crime (Frissen, 2020). Through the internet, people can fall further into a rabbit hole and follow interests that might otherwise be inaccessible. Instead of challenging one's views and interacting with people that may disagree with us, we can readily find solace and confirmation in ideological echo chambers. Even the most extreme views can be validated and exacerbated by joining the right group. Websites such as 4chan, Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram open the door to finding membership into dangerous groups (Alava et al., 2017).

The question of "who am I?" underlies many social interactions. The lengths one will go to answer this question and ease uncertainty are studied in a growing body of research under the uncertainty-identity model (Hogg, 2023, 2021, 2007 – see Choi & Hogg, 2020 for a meta-analysis of this work). Built on decades of previous research on social identity and self-categorization, uncertainty-identity theory aims to address the epistemic motive for group identification. Social identity creates a sense of self by

providing the scaffolding to frame one's identity through their group membership (Tajfel, 1979). To constitute a group, the members need to hold a shared psychological self-definition of their *social* identity. These shared attributes distinguish the ingroup (those people with whom we share attributes that distinguish us as group) from the outgroup (those people whose shared characteristics help to define the boundaries of our ingroup). Groups impact most facets of daily life; how we feel, think and act. Though each individual may hold many different social identities, only one is salient at a time. The prominent identity is context specific and changes based on social cues. We turn to our groups for protection, affirmation in our beliefs, resources and guidance. Although groups fulfill basic human motivations for enhancement and epistemic fulfillment (e.g., Anjewierden et al., Forthcoming), some group norms and their ideologies are unhealthy for their members and for society at large. The individual may benefit from reducing uncertainty (Hogg, 2000) by depersonalization – viewing others and the self through the lens of a schema that contains all pertinent information of the ingroup (Hogg, 2001) into a clearly defined and cohesive group. Although this provides group members with clarity with respect to their self-concept, it can also create a drive toward insular and complete "norm informing" groups. Extremism, as it relates to uncertainty, establishes clear boundaries between groups. Groups necessarily polarize (Hogg et al., 1990) and this is magnified when people experience conceptual self-uncertainty (Gaffney et al., 2014) When the norms are rooted in hatred, violence and destruction, extremism is readily attainable. Research on American conservatives primed with high uncertainty found greater support for extreme messages and progression deeper into the right than their less

uncertain counterparts (Gaffney et al., 2014) through adherence to the extreme fringes of the ingroup, which offers a succinct and explicit identity that is distinct from the relevant outgroup. This is the first step on the road to extremism by widening the divide and further distancing from the relevant outgroup.

The Social Identity Perspective

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that an individual's sense of self is enhanced by viewing the ingroup more favorably than a relevant outgroup. Our group memberships range from structured and tangible groups such as families, ethnicities and communities to looser connections based on ideologies or even temporary similarities, such listening to the same band. Groups are part of our lives from the very beginning, we are literally born into them. Group memberships provide people with important information for their self-concepts (Tajfel, 1971). The formative years are spent deeply embedded in family groups, and as we grow so do our group memberships.

Just as we seek protection from groups, we will also take extreme measures to protect the groups to which we belong (Syfers et al., in press). An attack on the ideology, values or shared attributes of the group is met with unified resistance. People reaffirm their beliefs and heighten the contrast between the ingroup and outgroup to strengthen their identity and reduce uncertainty. To threaten one's group is to attack their social identity and sense of self. This is the fundamental reasoning behind cultural divides, political extremes, war, and even genocides. The threat, be it ideological or physical, is often met with strong opposition and even violence. A notable example was the violent mob that gathered on the steps of the United States Capitol in response to the 2020

American presidential election. On January 6th, 2021, the attempted insurrection was a result of a culmination of perceived threats to democracy that was met with a failed endeavor to overthrow the government.

The actions of these concerned citizens are better understood when given the context that the norms and boundaries established by the ingroup inform members of how to process their environment and actions. This approach allows the world to be viewed as a more certain place (Hogg, 2012) that is able to be organized and mapped out by established boundaries. Ingroups provide a lens through which to view the world, but they also provide a lens through which we view our self-concept. Self-concept is defined as knowledge that comes from three parts of the self: personal, relational and collective (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The personal self is the individual's unique identity – idiosyncratic aspects of self such as personality. The relational self is structured by close and significant relationships, often dyadic, and roles held within them. The collective self is established and maintained by the connection to broader group members and the contrast to the outgroup. Each version of the self is meaningful and helps to build an individual's self-concept (Sedikides et al. 2013).

The influence of social identities derived from group memberships is evident in all aspects of people's lives. From the food, clothes, and art we like to the way we vote, who we love, and those we want to destroy. Social identities capture who we are and who we are not (Tajfel, 1972). This differentiation between groups allows people to focus on who they are as a member of the ingroup and the norms and expectations they adhere to, as well as who they are not, the outgroup (Turner et al., 1987). Groups reduce self-

uncertainty through self-categorization by clearly defining who the group members are and who they are not (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). The more clear a group identity is defined, the more effective it is at reducing uncertainty (Hogg et al., 2007) and validating the beliefs and behaviors of group members (Hogg & Turner, 1987). The distinctiveness between groups is established through clearly defined prototypes and how prescriptive and descriptive they are. These are the consensual features of the group that best define it by distinguishing it from a relevant outgroup - shared features are embodied more or less within each group member (Turner et al., 1987, Hogg, 2006). Categorizing the self and others provides extensive information about the social world. The depersonalization of self occurs when people define the self with respect to an important group identity and thus see the self and others as extensions of their respective prototypes. This process entails defining self and others using prototypical features of the group, which provides a road map for understanding how the self thinks, feels, and behaves, as well as how others think, feel, and behave. By adhering to a group prototype the group can define who they are and who they should be. Members that are high in prototypicality exemplify the characteristics of the group. According to the meta-contrast principle, prototypes capture both intergroup differences and intragroup similarities in an intergroup context (Turner et al., 1987). The prototype is the measuring stick used to gauge how closely one aligns with the distinguishing characteristics of the ingroup, while simultaneously upholding the distance from the outgroup. We rely heavily on contextual features that differentiate our own group from relevant outgroups. These are the things that we share, but that also

make us different from a relevant outgroup. This establishes a clear definition of “us” (Hogg, 2007).

Social identity theorists have identified three primary motives for group identification: enhancement, optimal distinctiveness, and the epistemic motive of uncertainty reduction (Gaffney & Hogg, 2022; Gaffney & Hogg, in press; Hogg, 2006; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Hogg & Gaffney, 2018). The focus of the current review paper is the epistemic motive; however, I will briefly explain the other two motives.

Enhancement

People are motivated to feel good about themselves, and the groups they belong to help promote this through self-enhancement (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Beyond the physical benefits from group membership; access to resources, protection, and support, people gain a sense of collective esteem from their groups. In today's society, this sense of belonging and achievement is potentially more valuable than tangible assets. These less tangible assets become accessible through strongly identifying with successful or high-status groups. The pep in one's step if their team makes it to the championship or the boastful banter of the winning fans are forms of self-enhancement through group membership. Even without having directly contributed to the accomplishment of the group, people can still bask in the glory as group members. Because of a basic motivation to feel positively about self, people also want to feel that their groups have positive value (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Groups evaluate their social standing by knowing what they have compared to what the outgroup has. However, people often belong to groups that lack societal value, because they lack status or are subjugated. This does not mean that all

members of low status groups dislike themselves or their groups or have low esteem because of their membership in them. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed several strategies that low-status groups can employ to feel favorably about the self: individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition.

Optimal Distinctiveness

Further motivation to differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup is detailed through optimal distinctiveness in that both the need for validation and individualization can be met through one's membership in a group and the simultaneous contrast to the outgroup (Brewer, 1991). Assimilation happens through the connection to similar others and fitting in or belonging while the need for differentiation is met by comparing to the outgroups. Assimilation and differentiation are in opposition with each other, it is the motivation to fit in while standing out and can come from groups that optimally address each other. Brewer uses the timeless and palpable example of teens blending into their peer groups but standing in contrast to their parents. This example can be taken one step further to emphasize the difference between similar close groups. Take the classic archetypes of the jocks and the rebels for example; fitting in with the ingroup offers assimilation while the contrast with the outgroup fills the need for differentiation. The acceptable choices in attire, music preferences and activities are strengthened by comparing the other group. Widening the gap through the comparison of us versus them, is beneficial to the group and the individual, it affirms one's place in the group and fortifies the closeness of it. The heightened contrast allows for a more succinct identification with the ingroup, one glance around the lunchroom and social categories

are set. Outside of the adolescent landscape, this same principle plays out across social settings.

While it was once considered impolite to broach the topic of politics in a public setting, it has become such a salient aspect of daily existence that political ideology is almost as easily identifiable as clique choices in the cafeteria. The groups must be unique and distinct but not so much as to break down into smaller subsets. Previously this requirement could be threatened by the size of the group but as technology has bolstered social connectedness, people can readily find like-minded others (Colleoni et al., 2014) and the threat of diversity due to group size has subsided. Potential extremists use the internet the same as everyone else, to connect with others (Winter et al., 2020) and in doing so are able to draw from a larger group base. Being one in 30 or one in 3000 is less of an issue when cohesiveness, entitativity (the extent to which a collection of individuals is perceived as an entity; Campbell, 1958, and intergroup contrast can still be achieved through socially close but proximally distant connections made possible by the internet.

Epistemic: Uncertainty-identity Theory

Uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007) posits that uncertainty is often aversive and creates a negative drive state. When people question their identities and who they are, group membership can offer one effective method of self-uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Group membership and self-identification as member of the group facilitate uncertainty reduction through self-categorization (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). The ingroup reduces uncertainty by offering a prototype, and a roadmap of how to behave and understand their world (Hogg et al., 2010; Hogg et al. 2007). Hogg and his colleagues

(see Gaffney et al., 2014; Hogg et al., 2010; Rast et al., 2012) have successfully primed self-uncertainty in experimental settings by asking participants open-ended questions about their identity, future, or beliefs. Over two decades of work in this area demonstrate that when people experience uncertainty, they demonstrate heightened identification with important groups (Choi & Hogg, 2020). However, not all groups are created equal with respect to uncertainty reduction.

Groups that are characterized by member cohesiveness and have clear norms and boundaries (i.e., groups that are entitative, see Campbell, 1958) effectively offer a clearer concept of group membership than more loosely knit and poorly defined groups (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). In conditions of high uncertainty, people seek reduction from an entitative ingroup (Hogg, 2012). Hogg et al (2007) demonstrated that as uncertainty increases, identification with an entitative group increases and that people demonstrate an overall preference for entitative to non-entitative groups when they experience uncertainty. The lengths that people will go through to reduce uncertainty can lead to drastic actions and identifying with groups that might otherwise be left to the fringes.

When we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, feelings of uncertainty can manifest in different ways depending on how well equipped we are to resolve the uncertainty (Hogg, 2000). Uncertainty is not aversive when we view a task as a challenge instead of a threat, and have the personal resources to address it (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1986). When not properly equipped to manage a situation, uncertainty is aversive and leaves us scared, anxious, helpless or unable to navigate the next best move. As a

negative or aversive drive state, uncertainty leads to greater buy-in to social identities as a means to reduce aversive thoughts and feelings (Jonas et al., 2014). Uncertainty-identity theory explores the motivation for uncertainty reduction manifesting in group-identification while acknowledging that absolute certainty is never truly attainable (Pollock, 2003). The approach is to reduce uncertainty, not to increase certainty. Uncertainty reduction is a strong motivator for identifying with highly entitative groups (Hogg et al, 2007; Hogg, 2010). Groups that are clearly defined and close knit are ideal for uncertainty reduction.

A wide percpeptual gap between social groups allows members to clearly identify who is with them and who is against them. By using the meta-contrast principle (Tajfel, 1959; Turner et al., 1987), the similarities to the ingroup and differences from the outgroup heighten the contrast and emphasize a “black and white” worldview. The meta-contrast principle outlines the efforts of the group to minimize ingroup differences while simultaneously maximizing the differences from the relative outgroup (Hogg, 2007; Tajfel 1979), effectively widening the gap between the two groups. Within the social comparative context, meta-contrast shapes the prototype by an effort to distinguish the ingroup from the outgroup (Hogg, 2006). When the group’s distinctiveness – the very thing that makes the ingroup the ingroup - is threatened or compromised, people push the boundaries to further distance their own group from the relative outgroups. The objective is to maintain clearly defined groups through social categorization and strengthen uncertainty reduction achieved through depersonalization to clear group prototypes. The more uncertain an individual is, the more likely they are to identify with a self-inclusive

category (Grant & Hogg, 2012; Hogg, 2007), thus the more important the distinction between groups. The ingroup reduces uncertainty by mapping out the "correct" response to a given situation, creating a guide based on prototypes of what to expect and how to proceed. The tighter, more defined and unified a group is, the more entitative and desirable they become to combat uncertainty.

A group that is higher in entitativity can better reduce uncertainty because they establish clearly defined group-normative behaviors and a well-defined social identity when compared to a low entitativity group (Hogg, 2007). Whether it be the Black Panthers of the 1960's or the Alt-Right movement of today, through politically motivated messages these groups provide secure identities to their members, distinctive attributes, and even their own rhetoric and symbolism. The Black Panther Party was instantly recognizable in their black beret, a symbol borrowed from French revolutionaries, and leather jackets as they organized to defend their community from police brutality and systemic oppression. Another hat to offer instant recognition is that of the Three Percenters, a circle of white stars on a black baseball cap, with or without the roman numeral three inside the circle, instantly denotes someone as a supporter of the far-right anti-government militia. The movements cannot be equated in anything other in their recognizability – this establishes their entitativity and ability to reduce uncertainty for their members.

When the group fails to provide identity certainty the members are more self-uncertain and therefore weaken the ingroup identification. A group to alleviate uncertainty can be found in innocuous settings; hobbyist, friend groups, sports, and many

more but the vocal, radicalized and mobilized groups are not limited to collegiate sports fans or crochet clubs. Regardless of what brings the group together and the norms it holds, entitative groups are preferred when people experience uncertainty (Cruwys, Gaffney & Skipper, 2017).

Extremism

Not all entitative groups are extreme, but all extreme groups entitative. Extremist groups hold a willful departure from societies norm within a given context (Kruglanski, 2017). This deviation can be noted in local street gangs to international religious zealots. A highly entitative group, one that is tight-knit, and holds clearly defined values provides exactly what is needed. These characteristics are foundational of extremist groups and offer a relief from uncertainty through clearly defined group membership (Kruglanski, 2017). Extremist groups maintain strongly held beliefs, exclusivity, and total intolerance for dissent, the ultimate "with us or against us" mentality. The appeal of an extremist group is in the potential it holds to empower, validate and provide some certainty to individuals that have not met those social needs (Kruglanski, 2017). In a 2012 study, Adelman et al. found that among Palestinian Muslim and Israeli participants, those high in uncertainty showed more support for suicide bombers than their low uncertainty peers. The researchers noted the participants in the two studies, Palestinians and Israelis, had different forms of extremism accessible to support. In study 2 the participants were Israeli Jews, and when primed for uncertainty and identity centrality, they demonstrated higher levels of support for military action than less uncertain Israeli Jews. These studies paired strong national identification with relevant uncertainty and showed that either side is

willing to use the tools at their disposal to protect their group. Currently, a decade after this study was published the conflict between Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews has reached an unprecedented climax as “deadliest and most destructive of the five wars fought between the sides since Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 from the Palestinian Authority” (Frankel, 2023).

Members of a group take and support more extreme actions to serve, protect or promote their group (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). The relationship between extremism and uncertainty is further detailed by Hogg et al., (2003) which outlines that the need for uncertainty reduction may be so impactful that it leads to extremism. Extremist groups offer the total package; concise prototypes, a firm grasp of beliefs and attitudes, and high entitativity. Everything from overarching political views to the color of the laces on their boots can be designated by the ingroup. For someone in need of affirmation and identity, this feels like the best medicine. The values and ideology that are readily provided by the group, with no margin or variation, forms the prototype that emboldens depersonalization. This reaches back to the self-categorization and benefit of a more organized worldview (Hogg et al., 2010; Hogg et al. 2007).

Other factors can impact the acceptance of extremist groups, especially in an ethnocentric (where one’s own culture is normal and acceptable and others are viewed more harshly) context. In many political arenas, there are often racial connotations, some blatant and some subtle. In a study of Danish and Indian students, support for violent extremism and extremist attitudes toward other cultures was associated with insecure life attachment (Ozer, 2020). This replicated previous findings that people that are more

focused on ethnic preservation show more support for extremism than those not focused on ethnic preservation. Revisiting current American politics offers a snapshot of this dynamic outside of a research study. White Americans will soon experience a shift in the racial compositions of the country as America is projected to be a minority-majority nation by 2025 (Passel & Cohen, 2008). The fear of losing the association between *white* and *American* widens the partisan divide (Craig & Richeson, 2014). The threat of white eradication motivates people to take to the streets, polls, and social forums. In 2022, the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism found a 38% increase in white supremist propaganda in one year. The 6,751 cases in 2022 were centered on racist, antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. This is just a glimpse into a bigger issue. Propaganda is a measurable and unambiguous form of communicating hateful messages, but not the only way. The confirmation and validation people seek from extremist groups trickles and seeps into their lives until they are deeply embedded in the ideology and values of their group.

Discussion

The intersection of uncertainty and extremism is a recipe for disaster; the most uncertain, cast aside members of society finding refuge in the warm embrace and structure of self-inclusive extremist groups. The seed that bears this strange fruit needs to be the focus of our attention. It happens every day and everywhere, with a long history to learn from. American race-based hate is as interwoven into our cultural experience as independence and exploration. It has evolved and adapted to societal changes, and continues to do so.

White supremacy has historically been supported and protected by Christian organizations across the country. This is evident from the Klu Klux Klan's close ties to Protestant organizations to the Christian conservative movement taking hold in the southern states. This white Christian nationalist front is able to grow membership by appealing to self-described marginalized groups and unifying them under one cause. Being a member of an ideologically extreme group provides members with radical norms. However, perceived victimhood and deprivation experienced in such groups predicts willingness to fight and die on behalf of those groups (Syfers et al., in press). That is, as Anjewierden and colleagues argue (in press), satisfaction of the epistemic social identity motive may occur by belonging to an ideologically extreme group that prescribes radical norms. Any threat to the status of such a group can then be met with willingness to fight to protect the group (Syfers et al., in press). The same rhetoric and affirmations targeting Christians that are fearful of the separation of church and state also appeals to those claiming immigration is our nation's greatest threat. The self-imposed

victimhood facilitates a power grab and justifies extreme actions taken to protect their values. The conspiracy theory that immigration is being weaponized to weaken the white majority and reduce voting power is known as the Great Replacement and has made its way to mainstream media and continues to grow support. This racially motivated rhetoric was at the center of the Christchurch terror attacks on two mosques killing 51 people and injuring another 40. The intertwining of race and religion is deeply rooted and often inseparable.

The distance between American Christians and the secular population continues to grow due to changing values. In a 2021 survey, Pew Research Center found that when comparing Christians and religiously unaffiliated people, there was a difference in how frequently they view topics as good or evil. When asked about labeling social issues as good or evil, 62% of religiously unaffiliated Americans responded that topics were too complicated to label. Only 44% of all Christians polled responded that social issues were too complicated to be labeled as good or evil. Approaching issues (such as climate change, federal spending, immigration and racism) with this fundamental difference in views leaves the religiously unaffiliated and Christians with a greater division to overcome. This presents an opportunity to exploit uncertain individuals and gain support. Strong beliefs on abortion, gun control, transgendered rights, health care and cost of education act as an opening for more extreme beliefs. Radical extremism through domestic terrorism is the greatest threat our nation is facing. It is not because of the mass shooting and violence. The threat is in the growing political presence these groups hold and their potential influence on policy makers. When the then sitting President tells a

known hate group to “stand back and stand by” when directly asked to denounce said group, the issue cannot be denied.

There is no absolute way to prevent extremism, but there are remedies. Individuals can find all the affirmations and identity they need just a few keyboard clicks away. As Grant and Hogg found in 2012, people with multiple social identities were less susceptible to extremism relating to uncertainty through identity prominence. Having multiple social identities to choose from when one is threatened offers an alternative to falling deeper into potentially extremist groups. Through attenuating the appeal of extremist groups by strengthening identification with a variety of groups the individual can realign their salient membership to fill the deficit. Furthermore, when uncertainty does not have to have a negative impact on the individual or on society, it can teach resilience and prepare us to take on the challenge and our experiences can be both a challenge and a threat simultaneously or separately (Uphill et al., 2019, Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996).

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