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Anatomy of a Violent Protest Wave: Understanding the mechanisms of escalation and de-escalation in far-right and anti-fascist street clashes

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Abstract:

With the rise of right-wing populist ideologies and ensuing social polarization, political violence has become more widespread. Between 2017 and 2019, far-right extremists and anti-fascists engaged in more than twenty violent protest clashes in Portland, Oregon, USA. Through a protest event analysis of those clashes supplemented with a case study of the protest wave, this paper explores how the mechanisms of radicalization and de-radicalization operate when two violent protest movements collide and interact with state security forces. The three-way interaction among a movement, counter-movement, and the police can produce unanticipated outcomes. For example, rather than de-escalating the situation, police underbidding resulted in an increase in violence between the two movements. Understanding how the mechanisms of radicalization and de-radicalization function in a movement/counter-movement protest cycle can provide insight into the ways in which a movement's strategy and their adversaries' responses to it can increase or decrease levels of violence.

Keywords:

Political violence, radicalization, anti-fascism, far-right extremism, movements/counter-movements

A rowdy far-right crowd outfitted in helmets and tactical gear, many of them carrying American flags on thick poles assemble in a red brick amphitheater in downtown Portland. Across the street, monitored by a line of riot cops, hundreds of anti-fascists are gathered in an old-fashioned town square including a sizable number of whom are masked and clad in all black clothing. As the amphitheater crowd prepares to march, their leader smirks and shouts into his bullhorn, "This is what the city of Portland wanted. They keep pushing and we'll keep coming back...." (Daniel V. Media)

The helmeted far-right protesters mass in the street heading towards the anti-fascists. The anti-fascist crowd begins to file out to meet them. Shouting ensues; a far-right protester is heard

screaming racial slurs; firecrackers are thrown, and the federal police guarding the amphitheater start firing riot control munitions at the anti-fascist crowd who scatter to escape the barrage.

The anti-fascists reassemble and intercept the far-right march a few blocks away. When the two groups meet, there is a momentary standoff, then a few protesters from each side lunge towards one another. The first punch is thrown, and a brawl ensues. It's chaos. People are on the ground being kicked by multiple attackers, others are hit with flagpoles or collapsible batons, bear and pepper spray are deployed. There's no sign of the police.

This was the scene at one of the most violent street clashes in Portland Oregon where far-right extremists fought anti-fascists at more than twenty protest events between 2017 and 2019. This case study explores how the mechanisms that lead to an escalation or de-escalation of violence operate when a radicalized protest movement and counter-movement collide and interact with state security forces. In this case, both the far-right and anti-fascist movements could be considered radical groups, because they were willing to engage in high-risk, direct actions, including violence, that are not sanctioned by the state (Snow & Cross, 2011). In this study, violence is defined as the use of physical force against a person. It does not include property damage, which was not widely used by either side.

The adoption of violent tactics by movements in contemporary North America and Europe occurs infrequently enough to make it a worthy topic of inquiry among social movement researchers (Jackman, 2018). The research on collective violence usually focuses on the episodic acts of violence that occasionally erupt during non-violent protests or on the emergence of armed underground groups that engage exclusively in violence to achieve their aims. A relational approach that analyzes the interactions between a movement, its adversaries, the political conditions, and the broader public is particularly useful for studying both categories of collective

violence, because the adoption of violence is socially emergent rather than ideologically-driven (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Scholars of radicalization, which is the process of moving from non-violence to a violent means of struggle, focus on the mechanisms, or the conditions and contexts that drive movement factions to adopt violent tactics and to a lesser extent, on the mechanisms of de-radicalization, or the environments that foster a rejection of violent tactics (Alimi et al., 2015). Some of the key mechanisms that drive radicalization include: *outbidding*--tactical escalation between a movement and its adversary, *dissociation*—the process of a movement losing support or legitimacy from its base or the wider public, and *upward spirals of political opportunities*--how a changing political context necessitates a change in tactics or approach. De-radicalization can occur when there are *downward spirals of political opportunities*--an improvement in the movement's standing among decision-makers, *underbidding*--de-escalation between the movement and its adversaries, and a *consensus mobilization*--unity and agreement on strategy or tactics among the various factions of a movement.

Many of the mechanisms of radicalization and de-radicalization identified in the literature assume that a movement's only adversary is the state. Mechanisms like outbidding and dissociation may operate differently in movement/counter-movement situations. Exploring how these mechanisms operate in a radicalized movement/counter-movement protest wave can deepen our understanding of the conditions that facilitate and more importantly, prevent violence from escalating further.

Political Violence and the Mechanisms of Radicalization

Collective violence is defined as an act by an organized group of people that is designed to inflict harm in order to achieve a political goal (della Porta, 2013). While historically and cross-culturally, movements have embraced a wide range of tactics including violence, social

movement studies often treat collective violence as an anomaly, because most theorists focus on mobilizations in European and North American democracies where the state has a monopoly on violence and political structures are more responsive to calls for increased participation and the expansion of rights (Jackman, 2018). In the 1970s, resource mobilization theory applied a rational choice approach to understanding how movements operate (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Using this perspective, researchers examined why movements selected different tactics, including those that are violent and disruptive. The use of violence and confrontation can make sense, because these tactics are effective (Gamson, 1975, Piven & Cloward, 1977, Cress & Snow, 2000). While the rational approach to understanding social movement activity opened-up new avenues for exploration, the assumption that movement actors make tactical decisions based upon a calculated analysis ignores important characteristics of activism. Movements are often forced to respond spontaneously and make decisions “on the fly” (Snow & Moss, 2014). Shared movement values and collective identities can shape the tactical decisions that are made in the moment and can influence how movement participants frame and evaluate spontaneous tactical responses, including violence (Snow et al., 1986; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Tactics do not emerge in a vacuum. They are dynamically produced as activists interact with oppositional forces, changing political structures, and the broader public (McAdam et al., 2001). Tactical innovations describe the novel protest methods that movements adopt in response to repression from the state or counter-movements (McAdam, 1983). Tactical adaptations refers to methods opponents use to counter these innovations and gain advantage.

Radicalization is the process of shifting away from more conventional non-violent tactics towards violent struggle (della Porta, 2008, 2018). While the radicalization process unfolds differently within each movement, some common mechanisms fuel the push towards violence.

The contraction of political opportunities for making claims by more conventional means, ideological competition among movement organizations, and escalating actions/counter-actions between a movement and its adversaries can all push movement factions towards violence (Alimi, 2011).

A few case studies explore the processes of non-radicalization, or the avoidance of adopting violence, or de-radicalization, where the embrace of violent tactics is halted or reversed (Weisburd & Lerna, 2006, Macklin & Busher, 2015, Alimi et al., 2015). Internal movement factors, like the desire to participate in more mainstream politics or ruptures between the collective identity of the movement and its use of violence can drive de-escalation. Additionally, if popular or political support for a movement grows or security forces de-escalate their response to a movement's actions, violence can become less appealing to movement leaders or participants.

Most of the literature on radicalization examines cases where a faction of a larger social movement develops into a clandestine organization that uses political violence or terrorism to achieve its aims. However, not all movements that adopt violent tactics develop into underground armies. Macklin and Busher (2015) examined four eras of fascist/anti-fascist street clashes in Britain, none of which spiraled into clandestine violence. De-radicalization was driven by the movements' desire to appeal to a broader public and take part in more mainstream political activities. Leadership also played a role in controlling the violence as did activists' values and collective identities. The far-right/anti-fascist protest cycle in Portland provides an opportunity to further examine how the radicalization and de-radicalization mechanisms operate during violent movement/counter-movement protest cycles.

Portland's Protest Cycle--Background

The Far-Right

Patriot Prayer, a Vancouver, Washington-based group, organized the far-right protest events in Portland. Patriot Prayer was founded in 2017 by Joey Gibson who claimed to be apolitical prior to Trump's campaign (Matarrese & Dake, 2017). Angered by online videos of violent scuffles outside a Trump rally in 2016, Gibson decided to go to the Republican National Convention where he realized, "the left owned the streets." The convicted felon and self-described house flipper returned home from the convention and travelled around the West Coast in late 2016 and early 2017 participating in far-right street brawls, which inspired him to organize his own right-wing street movement based in S.W. Washington.

Although Gibson often cites his Japanese ancestry to refute charges that he is sympathetic to racists and fascists, Patriot Prayer events regularly attract white supremacist and other far-right groups. A former neo-Nazi described Patriot Prayer as a "convention center for white supremacists," and noted that the group holds "identical beliefs in different packaging." (Olmos, 2020). While Gibson and Patriot Prayer may not directly espouse white supremacist rhetoric, they act as political entrepreneurs by activating and accepting a hodge-podge of far-right identities including those with racist ideologies (Tilly et al., 2017). Their rallies attract groups that can be described as violence specialists including the Three Percenters militia and the Proud Boys, an alt-lite hate group that act as frontline street brawlers.

The Anti-Fascists

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Portland had a strong anti-fascist direct-action youth movement that successfully disrupted neo-Nazi organizing in the city (Treloar, 2004). Rose City Antifa (RCA) was established in 2007 to combat a resurgence in white supremacist activity and

is one of the foremost anti-fascist groups in the United States. RCA monitors and disrupts far-right activity and organizing. They publish research articles exposing members of the far-right and issue calls for community pressure campaigns to get extremists fired from their jobs or to pressure venues to cancel extremist events. They also organize demonstrations to counter far-right rallies. The Pacific Northwest Anti-Fascist Workers' Collective (PNWAWC) plays a similar role.

RCA and PNWAWC do not hold open meetings. Their members remain anonymous, and most of their work occurs behind the scenes. When RCA hosts a counter-event, most of the attendees are not RCA members. Anti-fascist events attract leftists from a variety of political persuasions, although many identify as anarchists, socialists, or communists.

At various points in the protest cycle, more publicly organized, broad-based coalitions formed to protest Patriot Prayer. Portland Stands United Against Hate was a short-lived, mainstream left coalition that operated during the summer of 2017 and organized separate counter-events from RCA. Labor Against Fascism, a small coalition of radical union activists co-sponsored counter-protests with RCA throughout the cycle. In the summer of 2018, Popular Mobilization (Pop Mob), a coalition of activists from labor, civil rights, arts, education, and faith-based groups organized large-scale counter-protest events that employed creative tactics.

The Far-Right/Anti-Fascist Protest Cycle 2017-2019

The first major far-right event was held in an affluent suburb of Portland. Hundreds came out to counter-protest, including a contingent of anti-fascists who tried to stop the far-right from marching (Humphrey, 2017b). As in later events, the pro-Trump side included a number of violent far-right groups from the Three Percenters militia to a Ku Klux Klan leader (Olmos, 2020). A similar march was held in Portland two months later, after leftist groups threatened to

protest a parade, because the Republican Party had invited a hate group to march in their contingent (Brown, 2017a). After the city cancelled the parade due to threats of disruptive protest, Patriot Prayer held a march along the planned parade route. A number of far-right groups and individuals were present at the March on 82nd Avenue, including Jeremy Christian who arrived armed with a baseball bat. Christian hurled racist epithets at counter-protesters and gave a Nazi salute. The police confiscated his bat, and he was asked to leave by some of members of the pro-Trump contingent.

A few weeks later, Christian launched into a racist tirade on a MAX light rail train targeting two young Black women, one of whom was wearing a hijab (Bernstein, 2017). Three men surrounded Christian and asked him to leave the train. Christian stabbed the men killing two and seriously injuring the third. Ignoring the city's shock and grief, Patriot Prayer held another protest, just days after the murders. The event again drew the far-right, but it also brought out a thousand counter-protesters.

This pattern of far-right events and anti-fascist counter-events continued for more than two years. Violence was a key feature of these protests, though the frequency of violent outbursts and severity of the assaults varied from event to event. In addition to the organized events, the two sides engaged in confrontations in other arenas. Far-right agitators harassed leftist and anti-Trump demonstrators at a number of events including a city-sponsored immigrant and refugee celebration. Meanwhile, anti-fascists doxed, or publicly exposed, far-right activists involved with Patriot Prayer and launched community campaigns that resulted in extremists losing their jobs, getting kicked out of local bars, and in venues cancelling their events.

By 2019, the far-right movement appeared to be waning. On May 1, 2019, Patriot Prayer attacked a group of anti-fascists who were sitting on the patio a local bar. In the attack, a young,

anti-fascist woman suffered a fractured vertebra (Zielinski, 2019). The police did not arrive until long after the melee was over. A few weeks later, the owner of the bar filed a million-dollar lawsuit against Joey Gibson and Patriot Prayer. In August, 2019, just days before a nationally organized far-right event was scheduled to take place in Portland, the police issued warrants for Gibson and five other men involved in the assault on the bar. While a handful of confrontations have occurred since the arrests, there have been no organized, large-scale far-right protests and anti-fascist counter-protests since August, 2019.¹

Methodology

Protest event analysis is a social movement research method where protest data is collected from newspaper and other media sources and coded for variables of interest to identify patterns and cycles (Olzack, 1989). Although event histories have been used to trace revolutionary processes over long spans of time, this method can also be applied on a smaller scale to track localized protest waves of shorter durations. Newspapers are a flawed source for event data, because of the inconsistencies in reporting on protests and inaccuracies in some of that reportage, but media remains one of the most accessible sources for protest event researchers (Hutter, 2019).

Although the far-right/anti-fascist clashes that occurred in Portland took place in multiple venues from social media platforms to people's homes to the streets, I chose to only chronicle the twenty-one organized protest and counter-protest events. Data about these events were readily available from local mainstream and alternative media sources, while accounts of unorganized interactions and altercations were spotty. In addition, the protests were the visible presence of these movements and shaped public opinion about them. To qualify as a protest

event for this study, the event had to occur in the Portland metropolitan area and include an organized event and counter-event.

Protest event data was collected from well-established mainstream and alternative television, radio, and print media sources. While relying on news sources presents challenges, issues of bias were mitigated by the multi-media content embedded in many of these reports. Most stories about these events contained videos of the protest. For example, Oregon Live's coverage of the March on 82nd Avenue includes a reporter's forty-minute live stream. Most embedded videos are much shorter, but they capture the newsworthy aspects of the event, including most of the violence. These video clips enabled me to see parts of these events live and make my own judgements about issues that may be misrepresented or overlooked in the reporting.

Protest events were coded for three main categories of variables: tactics, policing, and mobilization. Tactical variables included the activities each group engaged in during the event (i.e. marches, speak-outs), the type of gear they wore and weapons they brought, and the frequency (number of incidents) and severity (level of injury) of violence at the event. Policing variables included the strategies used to control the movements, the number of arrests, and the severity (level of injury) of police violence. Mobilization variables included the number of attendees at the event and the breadth of the coalition each side assembled. Once the raw data was collected, indices were developed to measure the scale and intensity of each variable. The results were analyzed to explore the relationships between variables and to identify patterns in the protest cycle.

Since a protest event analysis only provides snapshots of a movement, an historical case study was also conducted to chart the development of each movement, their interactions, and the

city and public’s response to the violence. Case study data was collected from newspaper sources, participant observations at public meetings, and review of archived text messages between a Portland police liaison and the leader of Patriot Prayer.

Protest Event Analysis---Anatomy of a Violent Far-Right/Anti-Fascist Protest Cycle

Violence Levels and Policing

Figure 1 shows the levels of movement/counter-movement violence that occurred at each protest event. The graph measures the frequency and severity of violent incidents (see Table 1).

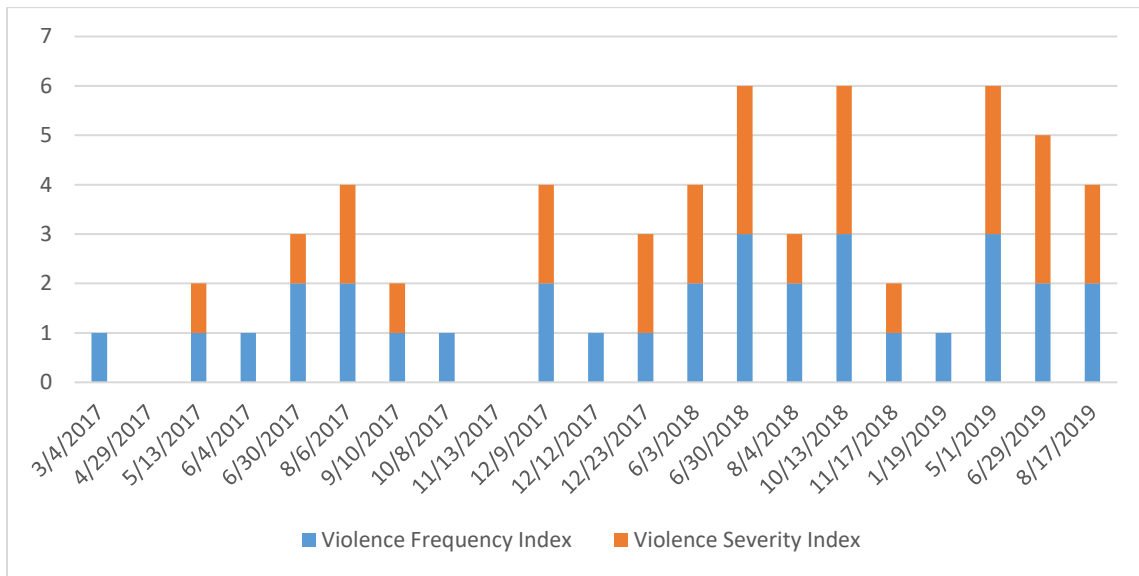


Figure 1. Protest Event Violence Levels (Frequency and Severity)

Peak violence occurred during three events: the June 30, 2018 march described in the introduction, the October 13, 2018 flash mob, and the May Day, 2019 bar attack. Each of these events included sustained and widespread altercations that resulted in severe injuries. There was a seasonal pattern to the violence. It escalated in the summer months, then fell during the fall and winter. The events with the highest levels of violence had smaller numbers of attendees, and some were hastily organized. The October 13, 2018 flash mob was called by Patriot Prayer in response to an altercation between a motorist and protesters at a Black Lives Matter event. The

Level	Violence Frequency Scale	Violence Severity Scale
0	<i>None</i>	<i>No injuries</i>
1	<i>Minimal—1-2 incidents involving a few protesters</i>	<i>Minor injury with no lasting effect (i.e. pepper spray)</i>
2	<i>Multiple incidents involving various individuals</i>	<i>Major injury not requiring medical attention (i.e. visible bleeding or bruises)</i>
3	<i>Widespread violence involving majority of protesters and lasting for significant time</i>	<i>Major injury with documented hospital visit</i>

Table 1. Violence Frequency and Severity Scales

May 1, 2019 attack occurred after organized leftist May Day events and a small far-right counter-event ended.

The least violent events were clustered in the early parts of the protest cycle. Three of the four initial events had minor skirmishes or no violence at all (See Table 2). Two of the events with the lowest levels of violence were held in the Portland suburbs, and some drew large numbers of conservative activists that were not associated with far-right organizations. The March for Trump (3/4/17) attracted many mainstream Republicans, and the March on 82nd (4/29/17) drew conservatives who were upset by the cancellation of the annual parade. The anti-abortion protest (1/19/19) included religious conservatives.

Events	Violence Level (Frequency & Severity)	Far-Right attendance	Anti-fascist attendance	Far-Right coalition	Anti-fascist coalition	Far-Right arrests	Anti-fascist arrests
Most Violent							
6/30/2018	6	150	300	National	Radical Left	2	2
10/13/2018	6	100	100	Regional	Anti-fascists	0	0
5/1/2019	6	20	40	Local	Anti-fascists	0	0
Least Violent							
3/4/2017	1	200	1000	Regional	Broad Coalition	0	3
4/29/2017	0	200	50	Regional	Anti-fascists	0	3
6/4/2017	1	200	1000	National	Broad Coalition	0	14
10/8/2017	1	50	50	Local	Radical Left	1	0
11/13/2017	0	20	20	Regional	Anti-fascists	0	0
12/12/2017	1	50	25	Local	Anti-fascists	0	0
1/19/2019	1	40	100	Local	Radical Left	0	0

Table 2. Characteristics of the most violent and least violent protest events

Figure 2 shows event violence levels with police violence factored in. When police violence is incorporated into the analysis, violence peaks during the June 30, 2018 event and remains elevated throughout the summers of 2018 and 2019 (See Table 3).

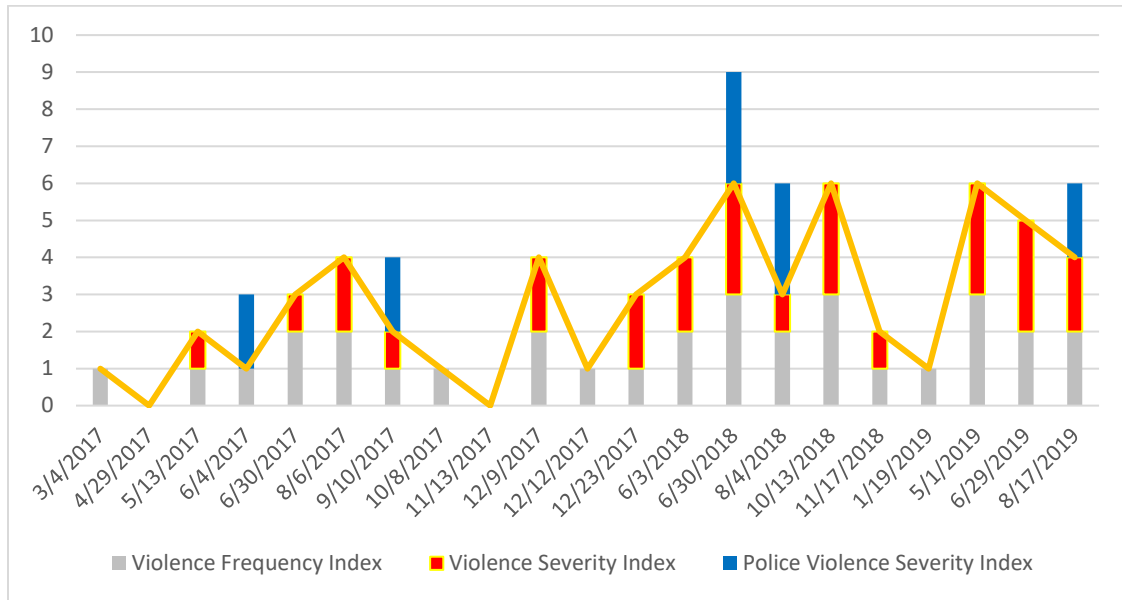


Figure 2. Protest Event Violence Levels Including Police Violence

Police violence was not directed evenly at both groups. Anti-fascist protesters bore the brunt of it. On June 4, 2017, police shot rubber bullets and stun grenades into the park where the RCA counter-protest had assembled (Bivins & Brown, 2017). On August 4, 2018, police fired riot

	FR attendees	AF Attendees	FR arrests	AF Arrests
June 4, 2017	200	1000	0	14
Sept 10, 2017	120	1000	1	9
June 30, 2018	150	300	2	2
August 4, 2018	400	1000	0	4
August 17, 2019	300	1000	0	13

Table 3. Events with high levels of police violence

control munitions into a large crowd of peaceful anti-fascists and multiple protesters were seriously injured (Kavanaugh, 2018). With the exception of the June 30, 2018 event, all of the protests that had large numbers of anti-fascist attendees were characterized by more severe police violence

Video footage of the protest events routinely show police officers lined-up facing counter-demonstrators, their backs to the far-right extremists. Although arrests were not widespread during the protest wave, anti-fascists were still arrested at much higher rates than the far-right, even when accounting for their larger crowds. In total, 61 anti-fascists were arrested at demonstrations, while only 8 far-right extremists were.

Tactics and Preparation for Violence

Despite the high-minded sounding names of their events (Freedom March, March for Free Speech, or the March for Jesus), the purpose of far-right rallies was to instigate violence. Before the first March 4 Trump event was held, far-right threatened to openly carry guns (Humphrey, 2017a). The far-right routinely signaled their intentions to engage in violence with the gear they wore and the weapons they brought (See Figure 3). At the June 4th event that participants insisted

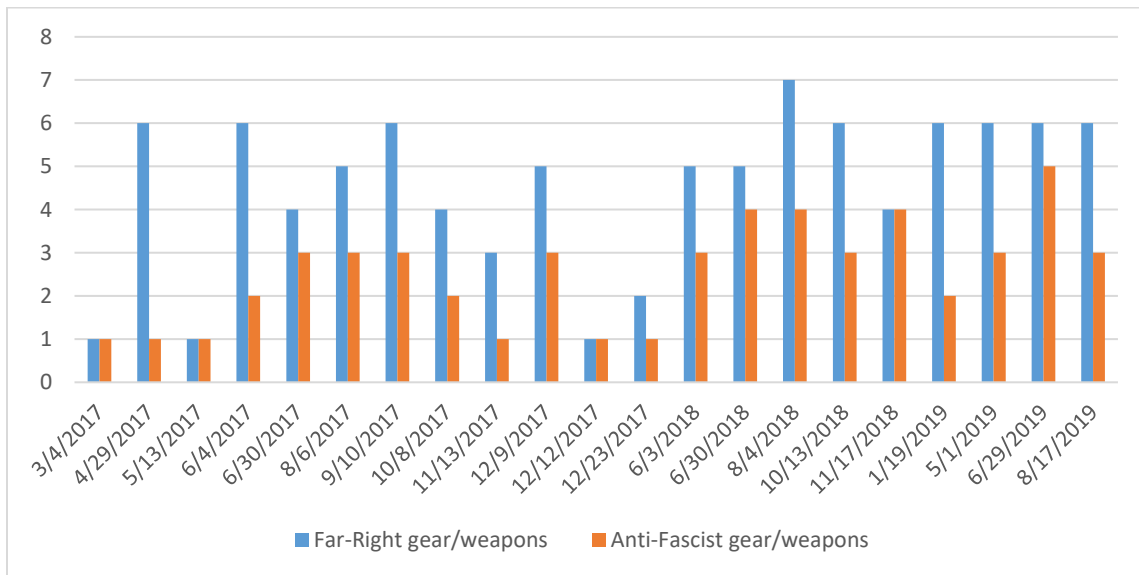


Figure 3. Protester preparation for violence (gear and weapons)

was about free speech, the far-right were decked out in protective gear and bulletproof vests and carried sticks, knives and other weapons. With the exception of a few very early events and some

of the smaller protests during the lull in the winter of 2017, far-right regularly attended these events dressed for battle and armed with weapons (See Table 4.).

Scale	Gear Index	Weaponry Index
0	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>
1	<i>Bandanas, Masks, Face-Coverings</i>	<i>Flagpoles, firecrackers, flares</i>
2	<i>Helmets, fighting gloves</i>	<i>Bear or pepper spray, mace</i>
3	<i>Tactical gear</i>	<i>Knives, Tasers, batons, brass knuckles, hammers, bats</i>
4		<i>Guns</i>

Table 4. Gear and Weaponry Indices

In contrast, the anti-fascists were less visibly prepared to engage in violence at these events. Anti-fascist protesters wore bandanas, masks, or other face coverings at every protest, but were less likely to carry large sticks or other obvious visible weapons, especially during the early part of the protest cycle. This may have been due to the increased police scrutiny of anti-fascist protesters. Police were far more aggressive about seizing signs with sticks, flagpoles, and homemade shields from anti-fascists protesters than they were about disarming far-right (Ryan, 2017).

Anti-fascist protesters' lower intensity weaponry and gear also reflect their more expansive tactical repertoire. At the March on 82nd, anti-fascists dressed in costumes, blew air horns, and juggled (Campuzano, 2017). Throughout the protest cycle, anti-fascists sprayed silly string, threw glitter, played instruments and drums, and dressed in banana costumes as part of a "banana bloc." However, over time, anti-fascists began to adopt the more militant gear that far-right wore. The August 4, 2018 event was the first protest where sizable numbers of anti-fascist protesters wore helmets. This rally followed the June 30th street brawl, where violence reached peak levels for the first time. An anti-fascist protester suffered a skull fracture and traumatic brain injury at that event, which may have prompted demonstrators to start wearing protective head gear (Sheperd, 2018).

The Impact of Violence on Mobilization

One measure of mobilization levels for both far-right protesters and anti-fascist counter-protesters was the types of coalitions the groups were able to assemble (See Table 5.) For the far-right, their broadest coalitions drew activists from across the nation. For anti-fascists, coalition-building entailed partnering with large numbers of organizations, especially those which had a reach beyond the radical leftist milieu.

Scale	Far-Right Coalitions	Anti-fascist Coalitions
1	Local (S.W. Washington and Oregon)	Anti-fascists
2	Pacific Northwest	Anti-fascists and other Radical Leftist groups
3	National	Broad-based Coalition

Table 5. Mobilization Levels

Violence was a key mobilizing tool for far-right protesters. Organizers were able to assemble national coalitions when violence at preceding protest events had escalated or reached peak levels (See Figure 4.) National far-right groups responded to calls to travel to Portland to

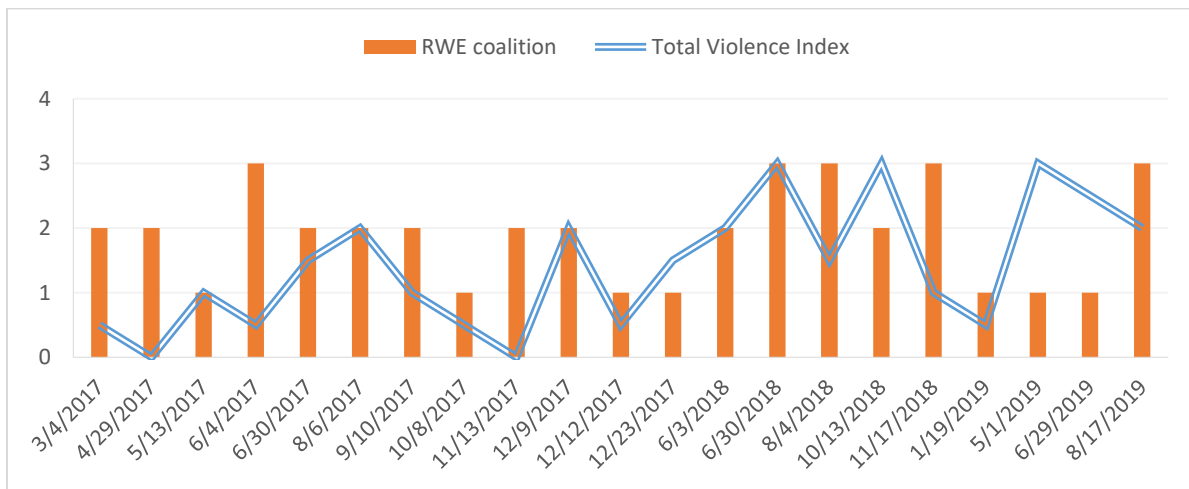


Figure 4. Impact of Violence on Far-Right Mobilization

punish anti-fascists who had injured or humiliated Patriot Prayer in the prior protest event.

At the June 30th protest, busloads of Proud Boys travelled from around the nation to take revenge on Portland anti-fascists who had chased and thrown rocks and bottles at the Patriot Prayer as they were leaving the previous march (Wilson, 2018a).

Far-right mobilization was also boosted by recent extremist attacks. Just a little over a week after the MAX murders, Patriot Prayer held their first rally that drew a national audience. The August 4, 2018 rally drew a national crowd after footage from the June 30, 2018 brawl went viral, and far-right media outlets heralded the Proud Boy who fractured an anti-fascist protester's skull (SPLC, 2018).

Many of the same events that catalyzed far-right were also mobilizing for anti-fascists, but for different reasons. High-profile far-right attacks and murders outraged community members. The MAX murders shocked the city and helped mobilize the first broad-based coalition on June 4, 2017. The coalition included faith-based groups, a wide array of labor organizations, civil rights groups, radical leftists, and committed anti-fascists. A similar coalition came together in response to Patriot Prayer's September 10, 2017 event, which occurred just weeks after the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In the latter half of the protest cycle, the outsized rhetoric by far-right inspired the creation of Pop Mob, a broad-based coalition that used creative tactics to confront far-right. Pop Mob's first counter-protest was organized in opposition to the August 4, 2018 far-right protest, which was preceded by intense violent rhetoric. While threats of violence and online chatter about guns and other weapons were a common feature of the far-right build-up to their rallies, the rhetoric surrounding the August 4, 2018 event was particularly violent. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2018), a group that monitors the far-right activity, warned that the event could become "another Charlottesville."

Discussion and Conclusions

Outbidding, or the escalation of tactics in response to the increased use of force or by an adversary, is one of the mechanisms that facilitates radicalization within a movement (della

Porta, 2013, Alimi et al., 2015). Conversely, radicalization can be slowed down or reversed if underbidding occurs, which is when security forces or other adversaries deescalate a conflict by responding with reduced force. The outbidding/underbidding processes usually involve movements and state security forces. In the far-right/antifascist protest wave, the outbidding and underbidding processes were complicated by the three-way interactions between the movement, counter-movement, and the police producing some unexpected outcomes that deviated from the patterns identified in the radicalization literature

Throughout 2017 and much of 2018, Portland police monitored the smaller far-right/anti-fascist events at a distance, but refused to intervene between the two sides even when fights broke out. The police insisted that the protesters were engaged in “mutual combat” and therefore, could not be arrested for assaults (Sheperd, 2019). While the concept of “mutual combat” exists under Oregon law, it applies to organized fights, not assaults that occur during street clashes. Lieutenant Jeffrey Niiya, who would later come under investigation for his extensive text message exchanges with Patriot Prayer, perpetuated this false application of the “mutual combat” exceptions in Oregon law among the far-right leadership and within the Portland Police Rapid Response protest unit (Portland Police Bureau). The systematic failure of the police to intervene in the early part of the cycle allowed outbidding to occur between the far-right and anti-fascists. Violent altercations escalated during the summer of 2017 and 2018, which made the violence much more difficult to control and de-escalate later on.

The police were not exclusively hands-off during these events. They took a more aggressive approach at all of the large protests that attracted significant numbers of anti-fascists. At the June 4, 2017 and September 10, 2017 events, anti-fascists greatly outnumbered the far-right demonstrators. On June 4th, the police fired stun grenades and rubber bullets into the park

where anti-fascists were gathered, while the far-right crowd was left alone (Bivins & Brown, 2017). While the police arrested any anti-fascists, who tried to enter the park where the far-right was gathered that day, they allowed right-wing protesters wearing body armor and armed with large sticks to repeatedly push through anti-fascist crowds.

Portland police were hostile towards anti-fascists, because they equated them with militant black-bloc protesters and anarchists. Black-bloc is a tactic where protesters dress in similar black clothing, cover their faces, and march together in a group. It provides anonymity, so individual protesters can engage in militant actions then blend back in with the larger group. Although black-bloc is a protest tactic, anti-fascism is a political stance, and anarchism is an ideology, they are often conflated. Police associate black-bloc protesters with property damage, violence, and animosity towards police.

The police felt justified in using pre-emptive force against non-violent gatherings with black-blocs, because they believed these protests have the potential to become riots. In November, 2016 after Trump was elected, large-scale protests erupted in Portland. Thousands marched and the police remained hands-off, until one night, a handful of masked demonstrators damaged property and rioted (Domonoske, 2016). After the anti-Trump riot, the police pre-emptively engaged in hard repression tactics against any protest that included a black bloc.

Police fixation on anti-fascists demonstrators caused them to downplay more serious threats by right wing extremists. On August 4, 2018, police fired flash bang grenades and rubber bullets into a large crowd of peaceful anti-fascist protesters causing multiple, serious injuries. Months after the August 4th protest, the city revealed that during that event, police had discovered that far-right extremists armed with loaded rifles had set-up a post on the roof of a parking garage overlooking the anti-fascist crowd (Friedman, 2018). Despite this alarming

discovery, police still considered the anti-fascist crowd a threat that afternoon, and the armed far-right contingent was not arrested.

The overwhelming police presence at the largest events demonstrates the authorities' fear of anti-fascist protesters. Police were brought-in from other agencies to assist and lines were set-up to separate the far-right from anti-fascist counter-protesters, which helped prevent violence. All of the large-scale protests had relatively low levels of movement/counter-movement violence. However, the benefits of violence reduction were not experienced equally by both sides. Anti-fascists continued to deal with violence, although it was perpetrated by the police, while the far-right were largely protected from violence as a result of large police presence. In this case, both underbidding, where the police took a hands-off approach, and outbidding, where hard repression was used, led to increased violence against anti-fascists, while outbidding benefitted the far-right side, because the heavy and aggressive police presence protected them from anti-fascist violence.

Dissociation is another mechanism that can lead to an escalation or de-escalation of violence between two groups (Alimi et al., 2015). Dissociation describes the process by which a movement becomes estranged from its supporters or potential supporters. Engaging in violence can lead to a loss of support or legitimacy. The battle for public legitimacy is not only waged by movements. The authorities must also consider how their response to a movement will be perceived by the public (King, 2017). If the police response to protesters is seen as too aggressive, the movement could gain sympathy or support, and the public may become more critical of the authorities. Similarly, if the authorities can de-legitimize a movement, the public might tolerate repression against it. As with the outbidding mechanism, the process of dissociation becomes more complex when it entails a movement, counter-movement, and the

state. Dissociation is further complicated by the multiple audiences that movements engage with. Movements can gain or lose their hardcore base, but they can also alienate a broader swath of potential supporters.

The hands-off policing strategies legitimized far-right violence within the Patriot Prayer base and led to the hardening of the political identities of far-right activists and their sympathizers (Tilly et al., 2017). Assaulting anti-fascists in front of the police without repercussion reinforced the far-right narrative that leftist protesters were a threat that needed to be eliminated and that the state was supportive of this position. In the build-up to the August 4, 2018 event, a far-right activist from Texas told supporters that police had given Patriot Prayer a “green light” to gather in Portland and physically defeat anti-fascists, and that failure to do so there would mean the threat would “spill over” into their hometowns. (SPLC, 2018).

Likewise, the repression that anti-fascists experienced did not lead to dissociation from their base. For anti-fascists, many of whom have strong anti-authoritarian tendencies, the lack of police response to protest violence confirmed their belief that you cannot rely upon the state to combat the far-right. Anti-fascists believe the far-right poses an existential threat to multicultural democracy and the state is complicit in fueling far-right movements. When the police routinely failed to arrest far-right brawlers and attacked anti-fascist protesters, this hardened anti-fascist attitudes about the state and bolstered their belief in community self-defense, which means using all tactics at their disposal including violence to disrupt far-right organizing and prevent attacks (Mesh & Pein, 2017).

While the hands-off policing strategy hardened the political identities of both the far-right and the anti-fascists’ supporters, it initially led to a dissociation between both groups and the wider public. News reports and comments from 2017 reflect the public’s dismissive attitude

towards both groups as they repeatedly engaged in “dumb clashes” (Brown, 2017b). As the altercations persisted, escalating far-right rhetoric led to further dissociation between Patriot Prayer and the residents of Portland.

The frenzied rhetoric that preceded many of the far-right protests glorified violence against the left. In the weeks before the August 4, 2018 event, far-right extremists from around the country were threatening to bring “thirty guys or more with AR-15s” and calling the next rally “a true war.” (SPLC, 2018) Patriot Prayer rally attendees didn’t just threaten anti-fascists, they demonized the entire city, including the mayor and police force who were hardly sympathetic to local anti-fascist protesters (Wilson, 2018b). The vitriolic social media posts and threats aimed at Portlanders from out-of-town far-right supporters galvanized the city’s residents and produced a backlash that helped mobilize a broader anti-fascist coalition. As the far-right became further dissociated from the wider public, anti-fascists and their approach to opposing Patriot Prayer gained more sympathy and legitimacy.

Anti-fascists were able to incorporate new activists into their coalition, because their movement embraced a more expansive tactical repertoire that emphasized creativity without renouncing militancy. Anti-fascist demonstrators who were not comfortable engaging in violence could participate in a wide variety of actions away from the front lines. The decentralized organizational structure of the anti-fascist movement facilitated this diversity of tactics by empowering affinity groups to come-up with their own protest actions. The August 17, 2019 event featured a Buddhist meditation and a Shabbat service, a costume-making station, dance performances, giant unicorns, impromptu marches, and a banana costumed band (Wilson, 2019). During that event, masked anti-fascists also physically defended the crowd from an attack by hammer-wielding far-right extremists who drove an armored-plated bus. By late 2018, the

process of consensus mobilization had emerged (Alimi et al., 2015). Consensus mobilization is a de-radicalization mechanism where various factions within a movement work in concert with one another within agreed-upon parameters, rather than competing against one another for tactical or ideological superiority, which can lead to factionalism and further radicalization.

The anti-fascist movement did not renounce violence in order to broaden its coalition. Violence remained an important part of the anti-fascist repertoire. Affinity groups and participants associated with the Pop Mob coalition would often “thank the bloc” for protecting the crowd. Pop Mob promoted the idea of everyday antifascism where ordinary Portlanders could counter the far-right by engaging in whatever tactic they felt comfortable using from organizing supply drives for homeless shelters to punching militia members.

In addition to the outbidding and dissociation mechanisms, radicalization can be facilitated or discouraged by changes in the political environment. Downward spirals of political opportunities refers to the improvement of a movement’s standing among those in power, while upward spirals of political opportunities describes the changes in the environment that weaken the movement’s platform or invalidate some of its tactics (Alimi et al., 2015). Downward spirals can lead to de-escalation, and upward spirals may fuel radicalization.

While anti-fascists were targeted by the local authorities throughout the protest cycle, by the summer of 2019, there were some significant shifts in the political environment. The rhetoric in the lead-up to the far-right’s August 17, 2019 event got so heated and volatile that Federal Bureau of Investigation visited one of the two out-of-state organizers (Bernstein, 2019). The overheated rhetoric and repeated attacks against the city by the far-right, conservative press, Republican politicians, and President Donald Trump galvanized community members and city officials who had otherwise not been sympathetic to militant anti-fascists or their tactics. For the

first time during the entire protest wave, city officials took a proactive stand holding a public press conference to denounce the far-right who had been demonizing the city and hosting repeated violent protests for over two years. A few days before the event, the police arrested six Patriot Prayer members including Joey Gibson on felony charges for their violent May Day attack on anti-fascists.

This study examined how the mechanisms of radicalization and de-radicalization can produce unexpected outcomes when movements interact with more than one adversary. For anti-fascists, both outbidding and underbidding by the authorities resulted in increased violence, while the far-right benefitted from increased police repression. Rather than deescalating the situation, underbidding by the police led to an increase in movement/counter-movement violence. While both groups maintained their hardcore supporters throughout the protest wave, the rhetoric that kept the far-right's base engaged caused the movement to become dissociated from the wider public and produced a backlash that led to increased sympathy for the anti-fascist movement. Anti-fascists were able to incorporate new members into their movement with their more expansive protest repertoire. In the latter half of the cycle, anti-fascists achieved a consensus mobilization that embraced a diversity of tactics including militancy and violence. The growing movement of everyday anti-fascists placed pressure on the city. This eventually led to a downward spiral of political opportunities where politicians publicly renounced the far-right, and the authorities arrested those who perpetrated the May Day attack. This slight shift in the political environment coupled with the fortitude of the anti-fascist movement that steadfastly resisted two years of attacks by the far-right and the police was enough to stop the violent protest cycle.

While more analysis needs to be done to determine if these mechanisms persist in other contexts, understanding how radicalization and de-radicalization occur in situations that involve movements, counter-movements, and state is particularly relevant given the rise of far-right movements in Europe and North America and the subsequent growth in anti-fascist organizations dedicated to combatting them. Inevitably, the violent ideologies of the far-right will lead to a violent response. Political violence has measurable direct and indirect impacts on the communities where it occurs. During these two years of street clashes in Portland, dozens were injured, significant public resources were spent, and some of the city's most vulnerable residents were subject to a climate of pervasive fear.

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¹ The Ku Klux Klan leader who attended the first far-right event in 2017 announced that he would hold a rally on February 8, 2020 in downtown Portland. A large anti-fascist group assembled to counter-protest, but the Klansman never showed-up.