Prevalence of Veteran Support for Extremist Groups and Extremist Beliefs

RESULTS FROM A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY OF THE U.S. VETERAN COMMUNITY

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About This Report

This report details findings from a nationally representative survey of U.S. military veterans regarding their support for specific extremist groups—Antifa, the Proud Boys, Black nationalists, and White supremacists—as well as their endorsement of beliefs associated with extremist groups, including support for political violence, belief in the QAnon conspiracy, and belief in the Great Replacement theory.

This project was conducted through a collaboration with the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute and the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being.

RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute

The RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute was established in 2021 with a generous gift from Daniel J. Epstein through the Epstein Family Foundation. The institute is dedicated to conducting innovative, evidence-based research and analysis to improve the lives of those who have served in the U.S. military. Building on decades of interdisciplinary expertise at the RAND Corporation, the institute prioritizes creative, equitable, and inclusive solutions and interventions that meet the needs of diverse veteran populations while engaging and empowering those who support them. For more information about the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, visit veterans.rand.org.

Justice Policy Program

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of the RAND Corporation that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.

Funding

Acknowledgments

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Key Findings

- The authors conducted a representative survey of nearly 1,000 veterans in the United States to assess the prevalence of support for violent extremist groups and causes.

- There was no evidence to support the notion that the veteran community, as a whole, manifests higher rates of support for violent extremist groups or extremist beliefs than the American public.

- Support for extremist groups—including white supremacism, the Proud Boys, Black nationalism, and Antifa—ranged from 1 percent (White supremacists) to 5.5 percent (Antifa) and was generally lower than rates derived from previous representative surveys of the general population.

- The authors also examined support for political violence, QAnon, and the Great Replacement theory. While support for QAnon (13.5 percent) appeared relatively low compared with general surveys, support for political violence (17.7 percent) and the Great Replacement theory (28.8 percent) appeared similar to that of the general population.

- The majority of veterans who expressed support for extremist groups did not endorse political violence. While this may sound reassuring, it also suggests that the majority of those who expressed support for political violence (18 percent of the total sample) could be vulnerable to recruitment for new or emerging extremist groups.

- Veterans of the Marine Corps expressed the highest support for extremist groups and beliefs among the different branches of military service.

Policymakers and researchers are concerned that the U.S. veteran community is at increased risk of radicalization to violent extremism. Early reports suggested that as many as one in five Capitol Hill attackers was currently or had previously been affiliated with the U.S. military.❶ Subsequent tabulations revised this rate. The University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) Program's Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, for example, in their July 2022 report, identified 17 percent (or 151 individuals) of the 882 individuals charged in connection with the insurrection as having military backgrounds while the George Washington University's Program on Extremism identified 13.5 percent (n = 131) of 968 defendants as having military backgrounds.❷

In addition, data collected by the University of Maryland's PIRUS document the rising number of veterans who have radicalized in the United States and committed crimes motivated by ideological views. The PIRUS dataset documents that, from 1990 to July 2022, at least 545 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds engaged in criminal acts that appeared to be motivated by "political, economic, social or religious goals."❸ Researchers identified an average of 52 military-affiliated cases annually in the PIRUS dataset from 2017 to July 2022 but only seven cases annually from 1990 to 2010. The vast majority of all these cases hailed from the veteran community, as opposed to the active-duty military.❹

Several unique factors are assumed to underpin radicalization and deradicalization of veterans. First, veterans are considered significant additions to violent extremist groups, given their past weapon training and their operational, logistic, and leadership skills. Veterans also lend a sense of legitimacy to militant groups that can further aid recruitment. For these reasons, some extremist groups have directly sought to target both veterans and active-duty personnel for recruitment.❺ In addition, the unique and often lonely experience of leaving the tight-knit circles of military life have been hypothesized to make veterans susceptible to extremist recruitment.❻ Extremist groups can provide a new and supportive social network, and their shared mission can provide a new sense

❶ Dreisbach and Anderson, "1 in 5 Defendants In Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military."

❷ George Washington University Program on Extremism, "Capitol Hill Siege: Demographics Tracker"; Jensen, Kane, and Akers, "Extremism in the Ranks and After." One potential difference between these two datasets is that the START program includes four individuals facing charges for refusing to leave Capitol grounds after a curfew was imposed on the evening of January 6, 2021, as well as the one Air Force veteran who was killed while breaching the Capitol.

❸ Jensen, Kane, and Akers, "Extremism in the Ranks and After," p. 1.

❹ Jensen, Kane, and Akers, "Extremism in the Raks and After." According to this dataset, the most common ideological affiliations of veteran extremists were antigovernment or militia (49.91 percent), white supremacists or racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (32.11 percent), and jihadist-inspired extremism (8.44 percent).

❺ Helmus, Brown, and Ramchand, "Human Intelligence: The Key to Ferreting Out Extremism in the Ranks"; Speckhard, Ellenberg and Garret, "The Challenge of Extremism in the Military Is Not Going Away Without a New Perspective."

❻ Helmus, Brown, and Ramchand, "Human Intelligence: The Key to Ferreting Out Extremism in the Ranks"; Helmus, Byrne, and Mallory, *Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military*.

of purpose that can fill in gaps left in the lives of those who no longer experience the sense of meaning and belonging provided by military service.❼

Despite such rising concern, little empirical research into the prevalence of support for violent extremism among veteran communities exists. While numerous surveys have sought to measure the prevalence rates of support for violent extremist movements and ideologies, no such study has examined such attitudes in a representative population of veterans. Such research is critical; much of our understanding of veteran risk for violent extremism is based on anecdotal accounts of a relatively small number of violent extremist attacks or criminal events. Hence, improved evidence with respect to prevalence rates and risk factors can help inform the allocation and targeting of prevention services and can be used over time to track the threat of veteran extremism and attempts to curtail it.

To help address this knowledge gap, we conducted a nationally representative survey of veterans. We specifically examined prevalence of support for extremist groups (such as Antifa, the Proud Boys, and white supremacist groups), as well as attitudes toward QAnon ideology, support for political violence, and the xenophobic Great Replacement theory. In this report, we not only examine the overall rate of support for these actors and ideologies but also compare these results to representative surveys of the general population, examine differences in support for veterans of different service branches, and consider the unique risk factor associated with support for violence against the U.S. government. This report helps set the stage for further empirical research on the drivers of extremism among veterans.

Sample

The sample was recruited from AmeriSpeak® (see the text box). A subsample of 3,213 panelists deemed likely to be eligible was invited to take the survey in November 2022. Of these, 1,153 completed the screening question and were deemed eligible for the survey, and 1,100 completed the survey (1,039 by web, and 61 by phone). Interviews were complete by mid-December 2022. All respondents were provided the equivalent of $3 for their participation.

The survey asked: "Have you ever served on Active Duty in the U.S. Armed Forces or served in the Military Reserves or National Guard?" Response options were: "I am now on active duty"; "I was on active duty in the past but not now"; "I have trained for the Reserves or National Guard but have never been activated"; and "I have never served in the military." Responses were restricted to the 989 individuals who stated that they were on active duty in the past but not now. All analyses were weighted with weights produced by NORC and are a combination of base weights to

❼ Brown et al., *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization.*

About AmeriSpeak®

"Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by US mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings. While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations." (Language taken directly from technical documentation provided to RAND by NORC).

account for probability of selection into the AmeriSpeak® panel, study-specific base weights to account for selection probabilities under the sample design, and final weights that adjust base weights to account for nonresponse. Results are representative of the U.S. household population that was on active duty in the past but not at the time they were interviewed, whom we define as veterans. Figure 1 presents sample demographic characteristics. Because this survey was weighted to reflect the general U.S. veteran population, these numbers track very closely with those of the 2021 U.S. Census American Community Survey.[8] Not accounted for in the weightings is the favorability of the political parties. The Economist/YouGov poll of January 2023, for example, documented that 46 percent of the general population favors the Democratic party, while 46 percent favors the Republican party.[9] These numbers vary only slightly from that shown in Figure 1.

Analyses

Weighted descriptive analyses were conducted to assess support for various groups and ideologies among the population and by subgroup. The primary outcome questions and response options are presented in Table 1. Group supporters were defined as those who responded "Very Favorable" or "Somewhat Favorable" to the questions about Antifa, the Proud Boys, Black nationalists, and White supremacists. Ideological supporters were defined as those who responded "Completely Agree" or "Mostly Agree" to the three questions about ideologies. In selecting the groups and ideolo-

[8] For example, the 2021 U.S. Census American Community Survey data show that 90 percent of U.S. veterans are male; 10 percent are female; 24.6 percent served after September 11, 2001; and 27.1 percent have attained a high-school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, "American Community Survey: S2101 | Veteran Status").

[9] The Economist/YouGov, "Favorability of Political Parties—The Republican Party."

FIGURE 1

Sample Demographics

GENDER

89.7%
Male

10.3%
Female

AGE

7.8%
18–34

21.9%
35–54

20.6%
55–64

49.6%
65+

RACE/ETHNICITY

72.4%	11.6%	7.6%	8.3%
White, non-Hispanic	Black, non-Hispanic		Hispanic

Other, non-Hispanic
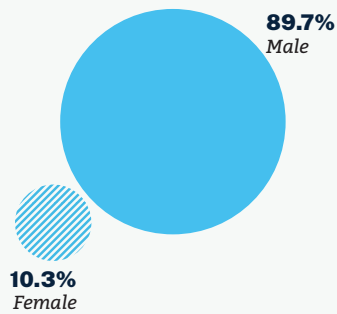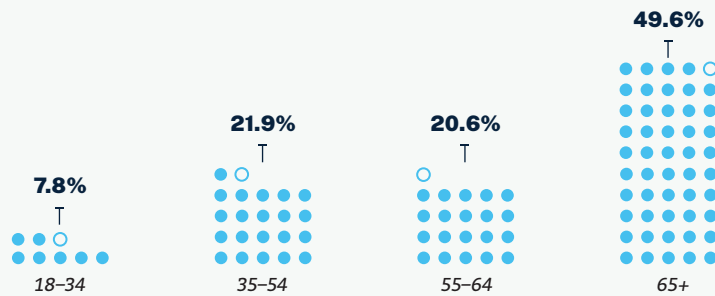
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

$100,000 or more — 28.6%

$60,000 to under $100,000 — 25.2%

$30,000 to under $60,000 — 30.5%

Less than $30,000 — 15.7%
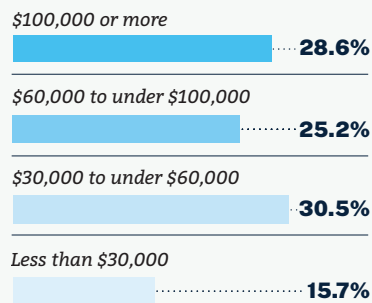
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Less than high school — 0.7%

High school graduate or equivalent — 29.0%

Vocational school, technical school, some college, or associate degree — 37.8%

Bachelor's degree — 16.3%

Postgraduate study or professional degree — 16.2%
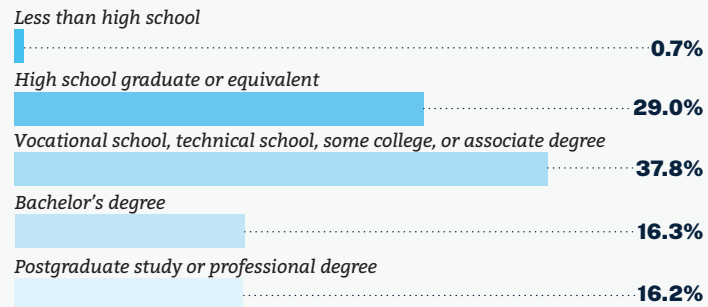
MILITARY SERVICE

SERVICE BRANCH
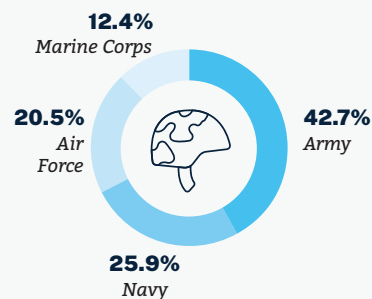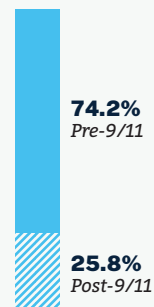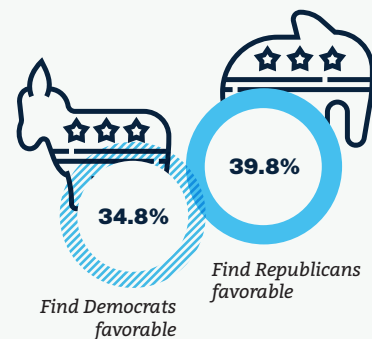
12.4%
Marine Corps

20.5%
Air Force

42.7%
Army

25.9%
Navy

WHEN JOINED

74.2%
Pre-9/11

25.8%
Post-9/11

U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES

34.8%
Find Democrats favorable

39.8%
Find Republicans favorable

SOURCE: NORC AmeriSpeak Veteran Panel

Support for Extremist Groups and Ideologies: Survey Questions

SUPPORT FOR [GROUP OR BELIEF]:	QUESTION TEXT	RESPONSE OPTIONS
Antifa	What is your opinion of Antifa?	❑ Very favorable
Proud Boys	What is your opinion of Proud Boys?	❑ Somewhat favorable
Black nationalists	What is your opinion of Black nationalists (Nation of Islam, Five Percent Nation, New Black Panthers, etc.)?	❑ Heard of, no opinion ❑ Somewhat unfavorable ❑ Very unfavorable
White supremacists	What is your opinion of White supremacists (KKK, Patriot Front, Aryan Brotherhood, etc.)?	❑ Never heard of

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following:

Political violence	Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.	❑ Completely agree ❑ Mostly agree
QAnon	The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation.	❑ Mostly disagree ❑ Completely disagree
Replacement theory	A group of people in this country are trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants and people of color who share their political views.	

gies used in this survey, we were guided by three factors. First, we were constrained to a limited number of items and, thus, were able to measure only a select set of extremist attitudes; second, we wanted to choose a mix of right- and left-wing variants of extremism. Third, with the exception of the question about black nationalism, we chose questions that could be drawn from existing surveys representative of the general U.S. population to allow comparison between veterans and the general population (see Figure 2 notes).

Results

Prevalence Rates

Figure 2 presents the results of our survey, showing the percentage of veteran respondents who attested to having very or somewhat favorable attitudes toward extremist groups or who

FIGURE 2

Support for Extremist Groups and Ideologies Among Veterans

SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST GROUPS (95% CI)

Percentage of respondents who answered "Very or Somewhat Favorable" to . . .

VETERANS   GENERAL   VETERANS   GENERAL
100%   100%   100%   100%

Antifa   VS   *Proud Boys*   VS

5.5%   **10.0%**   **4.2%**   **9.0%**
(3.5%, 8.4%)   (2.7%, 6.4%)

VETERANS   GENERAL   VETERANS   GENERAL
100%   100%   100%   100%

Black nationalists   VS   *White supremacists*   VS

5.3%   No comparison   **0.8%**   **7.0%**
(3.6%, 7.7%)   data   (0.4%, 1.7%)
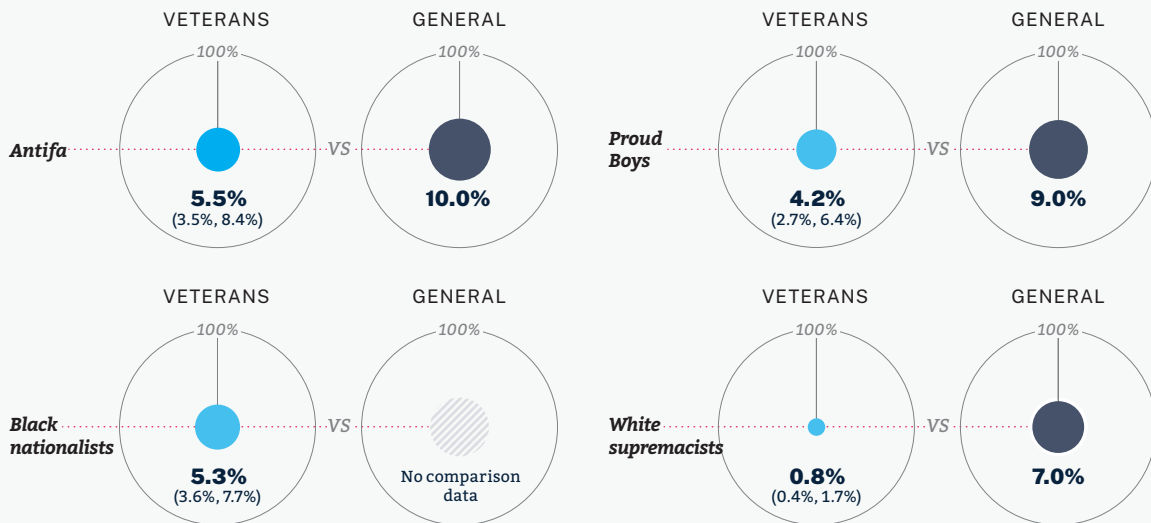
SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST IDEOLOGIES (95% CI)

Percentage of respondents who answered "Completely or Mostly Agree" to . . .

VETERANS   GENERAL   VETERANS   GENERAL
100%   100%   100%   100%

Political violence   VS   *QAnon*   VS

17.7%   **19%**[c]   **13.5%**   **17%**[c]
(14.7%, 21.2%)   (10.8%, 16.9%)

VETERANS   GENERAL
100%   100%

Great Replacement theory   VS

28.8%   **34%**[d]
(25.0%, 32.8%)
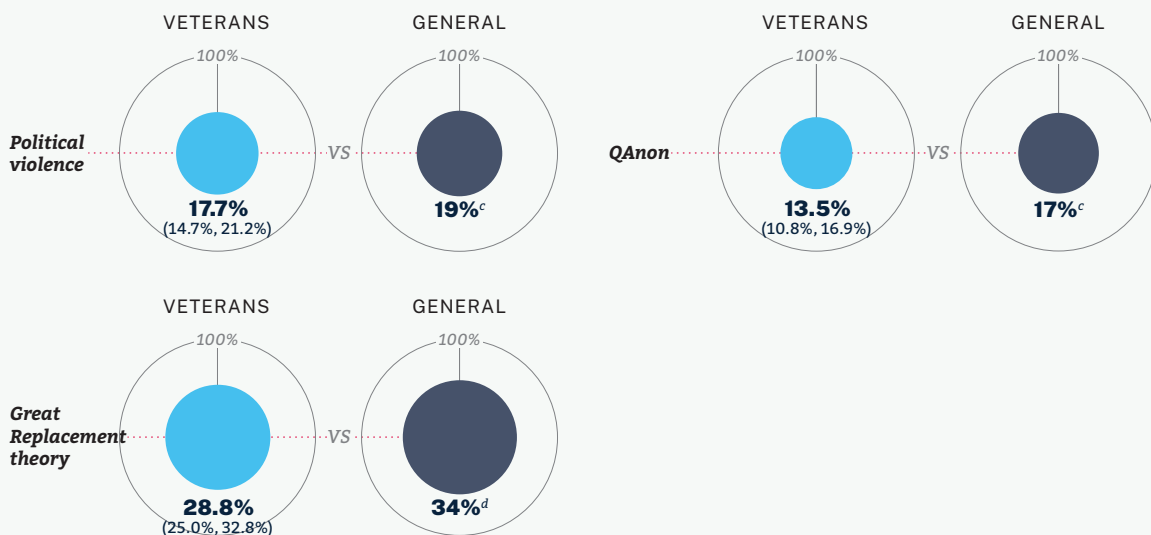
SOURCES: NORC AmeriSpeak veteran panel. Comparison data are from Morning Consult, "National Tracking Poll #2107125: Crosstabulation Results" (Antifa, Proud Boys, White supremacists); Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), "Challenges in Moving Towards a More Inclusive Democracy: Findings from the 2022 American Values Survey" (Political violence); Romano, "Poll: 61% of Trump Voters Agree with Idea Behind 'Great Replacement Theory'" (Great Replacement).

completely or mostly agree with political violence, the QAnon conspiracy theory, or the Great Replacement theory. The table also shows the results from representative surveys that utilize the same types of questions.

We asked participants if they viewed four extremist movements (Antifa, the Proud Boys, Black nationalists, and White supremacists) favorably or unfavorably. Overall, between 0.8 and 5.5 percent of the veteran respondents viewed such groups favorably, with the lowest levels of support offered for White supremacist groups and the highest level of support for Antifa. Direct comparisons with the representative surveys are fraught, however. Support for Antifa (5.5 percent versus 10 percent); the Proud Boys (4.2 percent versus 9 percent); and, particularly, White supremacist groups (0.8 percent versus 7 percent) was markedly lower in the veteran sample than in the general population surveys. We are not aware of any outside survey that also examined support for Black nationalist groups, which our sample of veterans supported at a rate of 5.3 percent.

We then asked participants the extent to which they agreed with the need for political violence, the QAnon conspiracy theory, and the Great Replacement theory (see Table 1). Nearly 18 percent agreed that it may be necessary for "true American patriots" to "resort to violence in order to save our country," and 13.5 percent agreed that the government is controlled by a group of "pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation." Veteran support for violence tracked very closely with the rates for the general population documented by the 2022 PRRI Values Survey, while fewer veterans (13.5 percent versus 17 percent) reported belief in a pedophile-run government.[10] Finally, we found relatively comparable rates of support for the Great Replacement theory, with 28.8 percent support among veterans and 34 percent support among the general population.

In summary, among veterans and the general population, we identified comparable levels of support for the Proud Boys, for "true American patriots to resort to violence," and for the Great Replacement theory, while the veterans exhibited less support for Antifa, White supremacist groups, and the QAnon belief in a pedophile-run conspiracy within the U.S. government.

Most notably, we found no evidence to support the notion that the veteran community, as a whole, manifests higher rates of support for violent extremist groups or ideology than does the American public. These results appear to be in line with the results from the PIRUS dataset. The authors of the cited study noted that the rate of military experience in the PIRUS dataset appears comparable to the rate of military service in the general U.S. population. Military-affiliated personnel represent 8.3 percent of the PIRUS dataset, which corresponds with a 7-percent prevalence rate for veterans in the U.S. adult population.[11] That finding is challenged, however, by the count of veteran and military cases in the January 6 attack. For this event, military personnel seem to have made up a higher proportion of all those charged in the attack.

[10] The comparisons become even more distinct when examining the percentage of respondents who completely or mostly agree with both support for violence and a pedophile-run government. PRRI uses a three-part question that provides a scale of the level of support for the QAnon conspiracy theory. In addition to the two questions that we used in our survey, PRRI also asks participants about the statement, "There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders." PRRI found that 17 percent of their representative survey figure completely or mostly agree to all three items. Our survey found that only 7.9 percent of veterans agreed with the two questions that we asked, suggesting that support for the overall QAnon construct is relatively low.

[11] The Economist/YouGov, "Favorability of Political Parties—The Republican Party."

Support for Political Violence

Overall, nearly 18 percent of veterans expressed support for political violence, and 13 percent expressed support for any of the four extremist groups (Antifa, the Proud Boys, Black nationalists, and White supremacists). We examined overlap in support for political violence and support for specific extremist groups to explore (a) the degree to which group supporters also felt prepared to support political violence and (b) the degree to which supporters of political violence also felt prepared to back any of these specific extremist groups. These results are presented in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3

Overlap Between Support for Groups and Support for Political Violence

Proportion of *group supporters* who also support *political violence* (%) (95% CI)

Proportion of *violence supporters* who also *support the group* (%) (95% CI)

Antifa
- 18.7% (4.3%, 54%)
- 5.5% (3.5%, 8.4%)
- 5.8% (1.3%, 23.1%)
- 17.7% (14.7%, 21.2%)

Proud Boys
- 33.1% (18.5%, 51.8%)
- 4.2% (2.7%, 6.4%)
- 7.8% (4.8%, 12.5%)
- 17.7% (14.7%, 21.2%)

Black nationalists
- 9.9% (2.5%, 32.1%)
- 5.3% (3.6%, 7.7%)
- 3.0% (0.7%, 11.3%)
- 17.7% (14.7%, 21.2%)

White supremacists
- 41.7% (13.1%, 77.3%)
- 0.8% (0.4%, 1.7%)
- 1.9% (0.5%, 6.5%)
- 17.7% (14.7%, 21.2%)
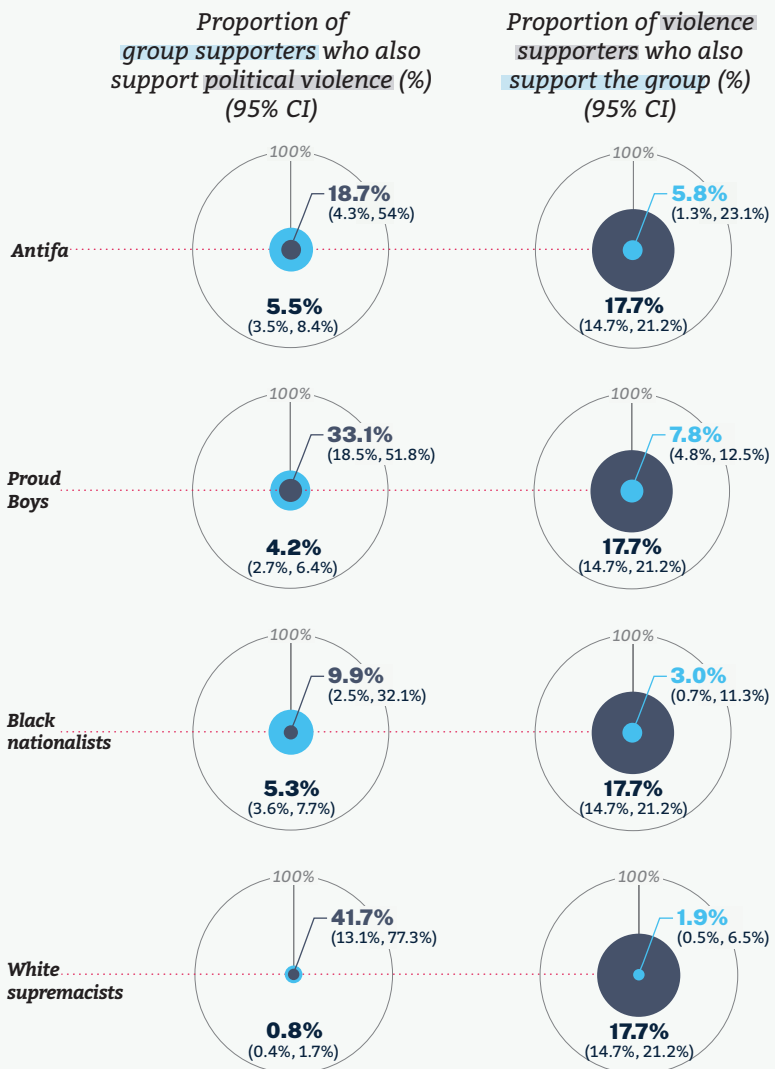
SOURCE: NORC AmeriSpeak veteran panel.

The majority of veterans who supported each extremist group *did not* also support political violence. Of group supporters, White supremacist supporters were the most likely to support political violence (41.7 percent), and Black nationalists were the least likely (9.9 percent). Of the 13 percent of veterans who supported political violence, most were not supporters of specific extremist groups. Of the overall sample that expressed support for political violence, 7.8 percent supported the Proud Boys, and only 1.9 percent expressed support for political violence.

The majority of veterans who support the need for political violence in the abstract are not supportive of any of the four extremist groups we studied. There may thus be many veterans who have the potential to be recruited by extremist groups (via their willingness to endorse political violence) but who are not currently supportive of a specific group. Meanwhile, of the veterans who support extremist groups now, the majority do not support the need for political violence. It is possible that supporters of these groups who do not also support political violence (up to 90 percent of Black nationalist supporters and nearly 60 percent of White supremacist supporters) either believe the groups' goals can be

achieved through nonviolent means or simply discount the group's militant agenda.

It is important to understand those who endorse the need for political violence but are not currently supportive of specific extremist groups because these individuals may be vulnerable to recruitment and possibly receptive to interventions to understand this motivation and redirect impulses for social change to more-productive or less-violent routes.

Service Branch Differences

We examined support for extremist groups (Antifa, the Proud Boys, Black nationalists, **or** White supremacists) and support for extremist-related ideological beliefs across veterans with a history of service in different branches of service. These results are presented in Figure 4. Marine Corps veterans reported the highest levels of support for Antifa, the Proud Boys, and Black nationalists, as well as the highest levels of support for political violence and the Great Replacement theory.[12] Both Air Force and Marine Corps veterans reported stronger support for QAnon.

Prior studies have suggested that Marine Corps veterans may be disproportionately involved in extremism. For example, 18 percent of cases in the PIRUS dataset that have prior service histories hail from the Marine Corps.[13] The Marine Corps was also overrepresented among individuals with military service histories in the attack on the U.S. Capitol, with nearly 30 percent of such personnel hailing from the Marines.[14] Meanwhile, only approximately 13 percent of active-duty service personnel are Marines.[15]

Some have suggested that the Marine Corps has a more cohesive group identity than other branches of service and that the Marine subculture encourages physical self-sacrifice.[16] While such values are emphasized and exploited by extremist groups (and may make adaptation to civilian life more difficult),[17] evidence for any organizational or other cultural dynamic within the Marine Corps as a potential driver of extremism would be based on anecdote or hearsay, given that empirical study of military culture in the United States is sorely lacking.[18] Systematic study of military culture and subcultures in the United States is desperately needed to help explain service branch differences in extremism and many other phenomena, such as behavioral health outcomes.[19]

Similarly, the reasons for the relatively high QAnon support among Air Force veterans are unclear. The Air Force Academy has been embroiled in controversy in the past for allegations of bias toward Christian beliefs.[20] Recent research has outlined how QAnon has built on Christian nationalist and evangelical themes to gain resonance and support.[21] However, as with any potential link between Marine Corps culture and extremism, any hypothesis about causal factors within Air Force institutional culture would need serious study to explore or substantiate.

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[12] We did not conduct significance tests because past military service branch is not mutually exclusive—many veterans have previously served in more than one service branch.

[13] Jensen, Kane, and Akers, "Extremism in the Ranks and After."

[14] Jensen, Kane, and Akers, "Extremism in the Ranks and After."

[15] U.S. Department of Defense, *2020 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community.*

[16] For example, see Haynes, *American Culture, Military Services' Cultures, and Military Strategy.*

[17] Whitehouse, "Dying for the Group: Towards a General Theory of Extreme Self-Sacrifice." For example, see Orazem et al., "Identity Adjustment Among Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans with Reintegration Difficulty."

[18] After Carl Builder's RAND study, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis*, few studies have attempted to collect systematic data on service branch cultural characteristics, and even this work does not treat the Marine Corps as a separate institutional entity. For an exception (although only about the Army and Air Force), see Mastroianni, "Occupations, Cultures, and Leadership in the Army and Air Force," and Zimmerman et al., *Life as a Private: Stories of Service from the Junior Ranks of Today's Army,*" 2019.

[19] Russell et al., "Mental Health Among a Nationally Representative Sample of United States Military Reserve Component Personnel."
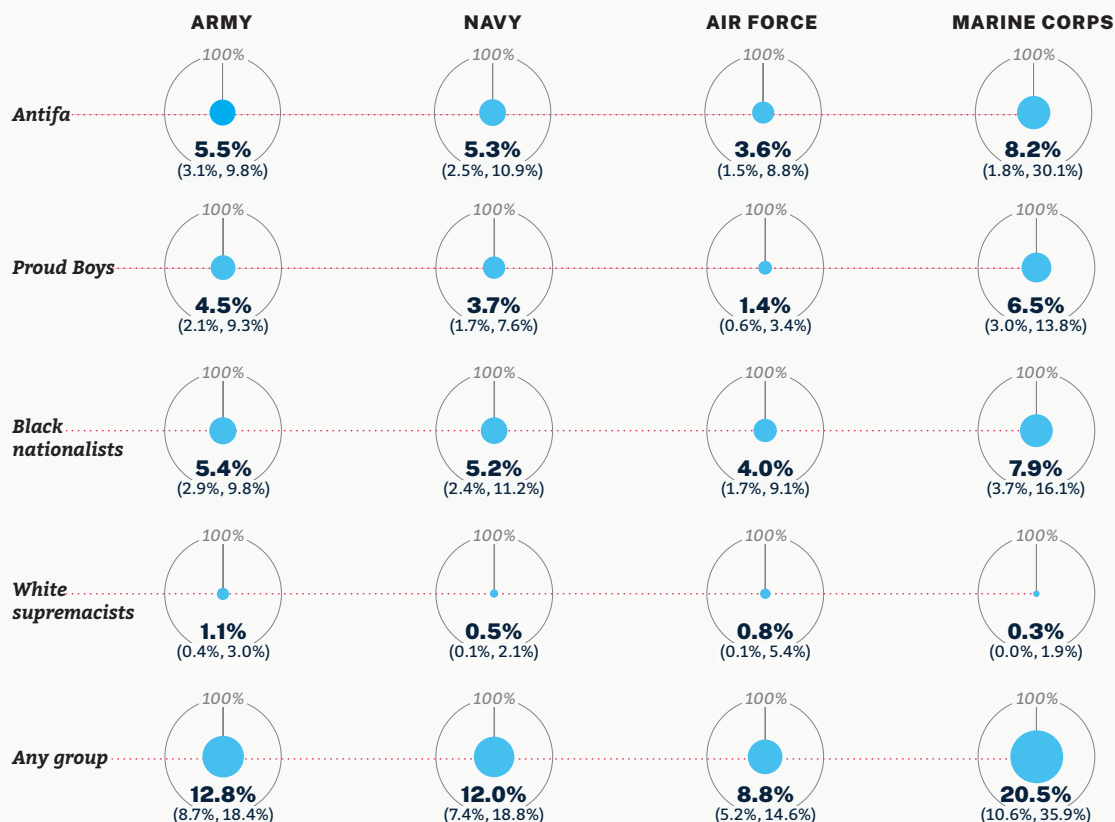
[20] Lederman, "Report Finds No Religious Bias at Air Force Academy."

[21] Armaly, Buckley, and Enders, "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks." See also MacMillen and Rush, "QAnon—Religious Roots, Religious Responses."
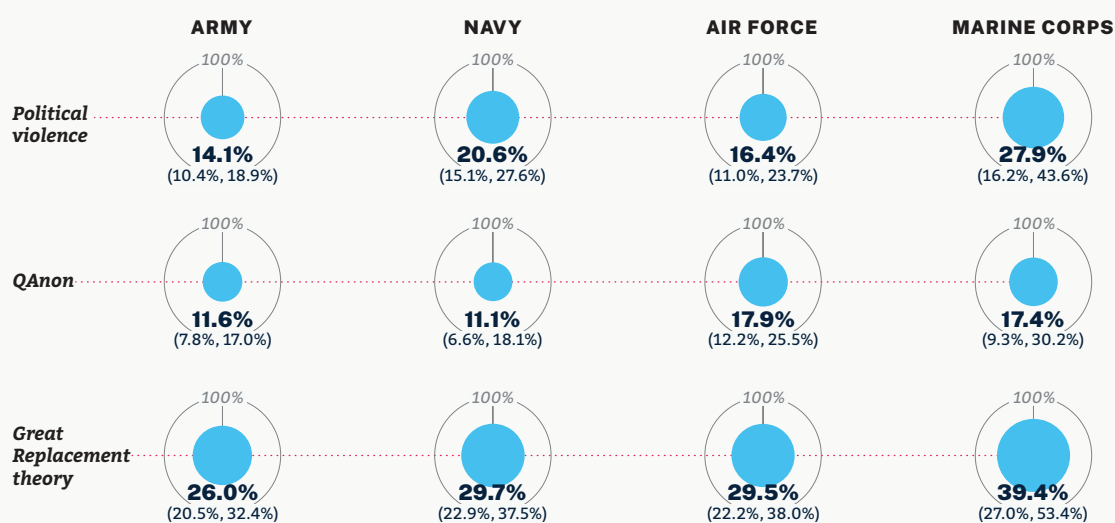
FIGURE 4

Support for Extremist Groups and Ideologies by Military Branch of Service

SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST GROUPS

	ARMY	NAVY	AIR FORCE	MARINE CORPS
Antifa	5.5% (3.1%, 9.8%)	5.3% (2.5%, 10.9%)	3.6% (1.5%, 8.8%)	8.2% (1.8%, 30.1%)
Proud Boys	4.5% (2.1%, 9.3%)	3.7% (1.7%, 7.6%)	1.4% (0.6%, 3.4%)	6.5% (3.0%, 13.8%)
Black nationalists	5.4% (2.9%, 9.8%)	5.2% (2.4%, 11.2%)	4.0% (1.7%, 9.1%)	7.9% (3.7%, 16.1%)
White supremacists	1.1% (0.4%, 3.0%)	0.5% (0.1%, 2.1%)	0.8% (0.1%, 5.4%)	0.3% (0.0%, 1.9%)
Any group	12.8% (8.7%, 18.4%)	12.0% (7.4%, 18.8%)	8.8% (5.2%, 14.6%)	20.5% (10.6%, 35.9%)

SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST IDEOLOGIES

	ARMY	NAVY	AIR FORCE	MARINE CORPS
Political violence	14.1% (10.4%, 18.9%)	20.6% (15.1%, 27.6%)	16.4% (11.0%, 23.7%)	27.9% (16.2%, 43.6%)
QAnon	11.6% (7.8%, 17.0%)	11.1% (6.6%, 18.1%)	17.9% (12.2%, 25.5%)	17.4% (9.3%, 30.2%)
Great Replacement theory	26.0% (20.5%, 32.4%)	29.7% (22.9%, 37.5%)	29.5% (22.2%, 38.0%)	39.4% (27.0%, 53.4%)

SOURCE: NORC AmeriSpeak veteran panel.

Conclusions and Recommendations

On the one hand, these results are encouraging. Considerably fewer veterans expressed support for Antifa than the overall U.S. population (5.5 percent versus 10 percent), and veterans expressed much lower support for White supremacists than the U.S. population overall (0.7 percent versus 7 percent). Veterans also expressed relatively less support for the Proud Boys (4.2 percent versus 9 percent) and the QAnon conspiracy theory (13.5 versus 17 percent). Because this research is based only on survey data and not on more-qualitative information, such as that derived from in-depth interviews, it is difficult to interpret the reasons for these lower figures for veterans. Given the anecdotal information about extremist group recruitment preferences and their active targeting of veterans,[22] we would have assumed that these reported prevalence rates would be higher.[23] In addition, the veteran population has more male and White individuals than the overall U.S. population;[24] both demographic factors associated with right-wing (and to some degree left-wing) extremism in the United States.[25]

Despite these encouraging findings, support for the necessity of political violence (17.7 percent versus 19 percent) and support for the Great Replacement theory (28.8 percent versus 34 percent) were relatively similar to support in the U.S. population. Meanwhile, support for both extremist groups and extrem-

[22] Yates, "'Digital Soldiers': QAnon Extremists Exploit U.S. Military, Threaten Democracy."

[23] It is known, for instance, that four out of five of the Proud Boys members indicted on seditious conspiracy charges were veterans (Toropin and Beynon, *Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror*).

[24] Vespa, *Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror: American Community Survey Report*.

[25] Chermak and Gruenewald, "Laying a Foundation for the Criminological Examination of Right-Wing, Left-Wing, and Al Qaeda-Inspired Extremism in the United States."

ist beliefs was consistently higher among veterans of the Marine Corps. Only a minority of the veterans who expressed support for extremist groups also endorsed the need for political violence. This may have two implications. First, those who support such groups, but not political violence, may be less vulnerable to actual militant recruitment. Alternatively, those supportive of violence but who are yet unaligned with specific groups may still be vulnerable to recruitment. Future research should seek to tease out this distinction.

This study had several limitations. First, in terms of response bias, it is unclear whether veteran respondents were more or less likely than the general population to confirm support for extremist causes (i.e., to report "honestly"). It may be that veterans are sensitive to the implications of expressing this support in a survey, despite guarantees of confidentiality. Second, comparing values across surveys is difficult. Our survey and those with which we compare results were conducted at different times and by different survey firms that drew from different survey samples. Third, we examined support for extremist causes but did not specifically examine membership in such groups. It seems likely that some individuals who support such groups would be reluctant to join them or to provide material or other support.

Finally, we make claims only about the prevalence of beliefs and opinions regarding violent extremism among veterans, not on the relative risk from veteran extremists. It seems clear that veterans, in comparison with nonveterans, bring a unique and dangerous set of capabilities and advantages to extremist groups. These include weapons, operational and logistical training, and leadership experience and, for some, combat experience.[26] It may also be that veterans who support such groups may be more inclined to actually join them or participate in their activities than nonveteran counterparts. Hence, even a smaller prevalence rate of extremist attitudes among veterans could still represent an outsized security threat to the United States.

Given the limited focus of this research, we do not offer specific policy recommendations. However, we do recommend several avenues for future research:

- Continue to conduct representative surveys among veterans to validate and extend the findings in this report.
- The Department of Defense should, likewise, conduct a representative survey of U.S. military personnel to measure prevalence rates for extremist support in the active-duty force.
- Research should be aimed at gaining further understanding of veterans who endorse the need for political violence but are not currently supportive of specific extremist groups. It is possible that these individuals are vulnerable to recruitment and that early interventions might mitigate this potential risk.
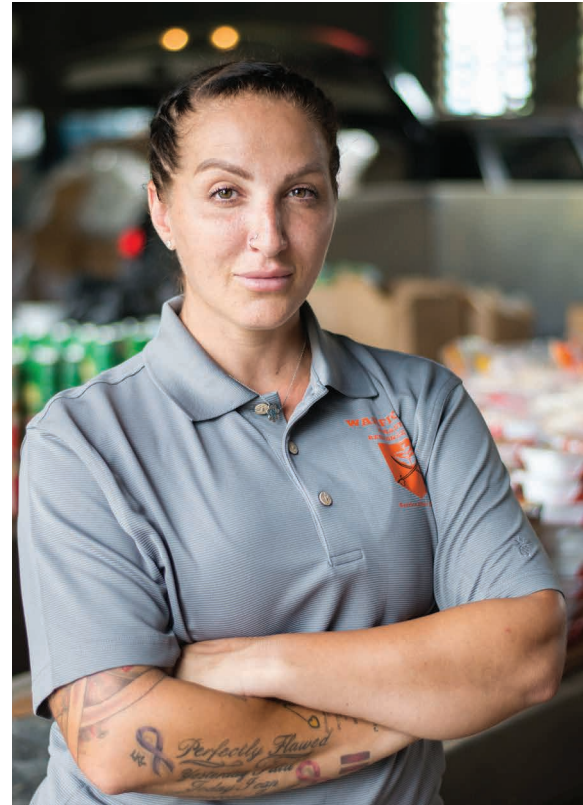
[26] House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Report on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans.*

- The U.S. military and veteran service organizations should continue to explore what drives some active-duty personnel and veterans to endorse extremist beliefs and join extremist causes. RAND recently published a report that used in-depth interviews with former extremists to better understand the factors that drove radicalization and the process by which former extremists extricated themselves from extremist groups.🔴 A similar type of interview-based study will be critical for the active-duty military and veteran communities.
- Rigorous empirical study of service branch cultures and subcultures is needed to understand differential rates of vulnerability to extremism; this research will also benefit understanding of institutional drivers for related phenomena, such as behavioral health outcomes.

🔴 Brown et al., *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization.*

Glossary

Antifa	"A political protest movement comprising autonomous groups affiliated by their militant opposition to fascism and other forms of extreme right-wing ideology."[28]
CI	confidence interval
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
PIRUS	Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States
PRRI	Public Religion Research Institute
QAnon	"Decentralized, far-right political movement rooted in a baseless conspiracy theory that the world is controlled by the 'Deep state,' a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, and that former President Donald Trump is the only person who can defeat it."[29]
START	Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism Program
USPS	U.S. Postal Service

[28] Oxford University Press, "Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2017."

[29] Anti-Defamation League, "QAnon."

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Policymakers and researchers are concerned that the U.S. veteran community is at increased risk of radicalization to violent extremism. Although subsequently revised downward, early reports suggested that as many as one in five Capitol Hill attackers was currently or had previously been affiliated with the U.S. military. Extremist groups actively target military members and veterans for recruitment because of their training and operational, logistic, and leadership skills. The unique and often lonely experience of leaving the military has been hypothesized to make veterans susceptible to such recruitment.

To help address these concerns, the authors conducted a nationally representative survey of veterans to examine the prevalence of support for specific extremist groups and ideologies, including support for political violence. The authors compared their results with those from surveys of the general population. Among other findings, the veteran community, as a whole, did not manifest higher support than the general population. Interestingly, the majority of those who supported political violence were not also supporters of specific groups.

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