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## Who Are the “Alt-Right”? On the Rise of Reactionary Hatred and How to Fight it

By Anthony DiMaggio  
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With the rise in public visibility of far-right-wing militants in the U.S. following the events in Charlottesville, much of the public is scrambling to understand just what this movement is and

what forces are driving it. With much of the public discussing strategies for how best to fight right-wing extremism, the need for constructive solutions is greater than ever.

First and foremost, it's important to point out that public support for far-right extremists is miniscule. The vast majority of Americans reject this movement's violence and hatred. According to a Marist survey from the summer of 2017, just 4 percent of Americans said they support "white supremacy movement" or "white nationalism." Similarly, just 6 percent embraced the term "alt-right." Still, there is a legitimate concern that support for right-wing bigotry may grow in the future if left unchecked.

White nationalists represent one part of Trump's support base, albeit the most radical part. Trump supporters were about two times as likely as non-Trump supporters to embrace "white supremacy" and "white nationalism" when asked in the Marist survey, although just 5 and 6 percent of Trump supporters respectively supported these ideologies, while only 9 percent supported the "alt-right." Although recent surveys show that most Trump supporters embrace racist and xenophobic views, and the vast majority share little interest in combatting societal racism, sexism, or inequality, most are not so polarized that they openly support white nationalist protest and violence. Sixty-three million American adults voted for Trump in 2016 – about 25 percent of the adult public. By comparison, white nationalism and supremacy are supported by just 4 percent of Americans. While there's significant overlap between support for white supremacy and for Trump, these two phenomena are not synonymous.

Recognizing the differences between white nationalists of the "alt-right" and Trump supporters is necessary to understand what is fueling the far-right. It is an exaggeration to claim that Trump voters supported a candidate who was racist, sexist, and xenophobic because of their economic anxiety. Previous research shows that Trump voters were generally not economically distressed; if anything, they were more affluent than the average American, and less likely to hail from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Most of Trump's support base is based in the historically privileged conservative and Republican segment of America. For more on the data documenting these trends, see the following studies [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

White nationalists and supremacists mirror the Republican Party's demographic base in some ways. Like other Republicans, they are more likely to be male, conservative, and to identify with the right-wing Tea Party contingent in Congress. But in contrast to most members of the Trump-supporting Republican right, they are not more economically privileged. As the recent Marist poll finds, Americans identifying with the "alt-right," "white nationalists" and "white supremacy" were three times more likely to earn under the median national household income of less than \$50,000 a year than to earn over the median income.

Race by itself is not a significant defining characteristic for supporters of the white nationalist/supremacist right. White Americans are not more likely than black and Hispanic Americans to support the far right, and the vast majority of whites are no white supremacists of the "alt-right" variety. Rather, the interaction between race and lack of education seems to play a defining role in radicalizing some Americans in favor of the far-right. When white Americans lack basic educational opportunities and lack access to the information necessary to combat

simplistic and erroneous claims of white superiority over people of color, they are more likely to slip into the trap of embracing racial bigotry and hatred.

Despite previous efforts to associate the far-right with young and disillusioned Americans, the evidence of this connection is limited. While the 18-29 age demographic is twice as likely to support the “alt-right” label compared to all other age cohorts, this group is not more likely than other age groups to say they support “white supremacy” or “white nationalism.” Furthermore, young Americans are more likely to identify as left in their politics than right.

It would also be a mistake to attribute support to the far-right merely to economic insecurity.

Much of the recent evidence suggests that economic insecurity is associated with increased support for progressive-left political and economic attitudes, and support for progressive social movements representing the disadvantaged such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and the Fight for \$15 living wage movement. Rather, it appears to be a convergence of factors that work together to push some Americans to the far right, including gravitating toward one-sided alternative media content that embraces the rhetoric of hate. This point is verified in a recent academic study finding that those adopting the “alt-right” label are more likely to express distrust of the mass media, and to rely on alternative media for their information.

It should not be a surprise that reliance on one-sided media content is driving societal polarization. Previous research reveals that consumption of far-right media is associated with developing right-wing attitudes. Selective exposure to information can have detrimental effects, since those opting-into online right-wing “echo chambers” are more likely to deny themselves access to viewpoints that challenge their own views.

The above data suggest that far-right white nationalism has formed from a confluence of numerous factors. These factors include race, class, education, and media consumption. In other words, poorly educated whites who have suffered under the modern neoliberal economy, and who in their alienation gravitate to conspiratorial online information, are prime recruits for the white supremacist movement. Citing the very real economic anxiety of members of the “alt-right” is not meant to defend their hatred or actions, but rather to spotlight precisely where this problem originates.

The findings above are valuable because they provide us with not only a better understanding of where far-right white nationalism comes from, but they also tell us how to fight it. The battle against hate begins with a recommitment from educational institutions to combating reactionary and racist beliefs. To be fair, most educators are already committed to combating racial prejudice and hate. But with the conservative assault on public educational institutions, it is becoming more difficult to secure a quality education for much of the public. This problem becomes more pronounced in poorer, rural, white communities, in which many individuals have little exposure to racial or ethnic diversity, and in which educational institutions are often severely under-funded.

Another means of fighting the rise of the “alt-right” is through reducing economic inequality. If economic desperation is fueling right-wing radicalism, efforts to combat poverty can help

remove the economic desperation that underlies the rise of bigotry and hatred. But inequality has been growing in the U.S. for decades, and is now at record levels. Without a serious government commitment to programs that redistribute resources from rich to poor, we are unlikely to see a reduction in inequality. Progressive activists would do well to organize and pressure government to implement such programs. These include: a living wage for all Americans, new legislative protections allowing workers to unionize and collectively bargain for better wages, the introduction of universal health care to ease the mounting costs of care in the U.S., an increase in federal funding for k-12 education (especially in poorer communities), and the introduction of a free college tuition program, coupled with mass student loan forgiveness for millions of Americans sidled with copious amounts of debt.

Combating hatred can be done, and must be prioritized. At a time when the president defends many of the Charlottesville white supremacists and Nazis as “very fine people,” the stakes could not be clearer in demonstrating the need to marginalize right-wing bigotry. But we won’t begin to roll back the problem of white supremacy until we recognize the causes of this hatred. There is much talk about actively combating far-right protesters in the streets via violent and non-violent methods. But it will take a lot more than street fights to address the mounting problem of American fascism. It will take an organized, concerted effort on the part of the masses of Americans to pressure government to reverse the economic trends that are fueling the rise of the reactionary right to national prominence. And it will take a re-prioritization of education, which has been sorely lacking in the modern era.