October 2020

STANDING BY

Right-Wing Militia Groups & the US Election

Executive Summary

Militia groups and other armed non-state actors pose a serious threat to the safety and security of American voters. Throughout the summer and leading up to the general election, these groups have become more assertive, with activities ranging from intervening in protests to organizing kidnapping plots targeting elected officials (CNN, 13 October 2020). Both the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have specifically identified extreme far right-wing and racist movements as a primary risk factor heading into November, describing the election as a potential "flashpoint" for reactionary violence (The Nation, 30 September 2020; New York Times, 6 October 2020).

ACLED collects and analyzes information about the actions of state, non-state, and sole perpetrator violence[1] and demonstration activity. MilitiaWatch tracks, documents, and analyzes contemporary US militia movements, and provides reports connecting long-term militia trends to broader political events. ACLED and MilitiaWatch data indicate that right-wing militias have steadily ramped up their activities, and taken on an increasingly outsized profile within the national political environment.

This joint report reviews the latest data on right-wing militia organizations across the country, identifying the most active groups and mapping the locations most likely to experience heightened militia activity before, during, and after the election.

Although many US militias can be described as 'latent' in that they threaten more violence than they commit, several recently organized militias are associated with a right-wing ideology of extreme violence towards communities opposed to their rhetoric and demands for dominance and control. The lack of open sanctions of these groups from public figures and select local law enforcement has given them space to operate, while concurrently allowing political figures to claim little direct responsibility for violent actions from which they hope to benefit.

ACLED has tracked the activities of over 80 militias across the US in recent months, the vast majority of which are right-wing armed groups. This report maps a subset of the most active right-wing militias, including 'mainstream militias,' which are those that work to align with US law enforcement (the Three Percenters, the Oath Keepers, the Light Foot Militia, the Civilian Defense Force, and the American Contingency); street movements that are highly active in brawls (the Proud Boys, and Patriot Prayer); and highly devolved libertarian groups, which have a history of conflict and are skeptical of state forces (the Boogaloo Bois, and People's Rights [Bundy Ranch]).

Analysis of a variety of drivers and barriers to militia activity allows for identification of high-risk locations ahead of the election. These include locations that have seen **substantial engagement in anti-coronavirus lockdown protests** as well as places where militias might have **perceptions of 'leftist coup' activities**. Spaces where militias have been active in setting up **recruitment drives or holding**

[1] ACLED tracks the activities of sole perpetrators in the US context though not in other contexts. For more, see this methodology primer.

training for members are also at heightened risk, as are spaces where militia members cultivate **personal relationships with police or law enforcement** or where there might be a **friendly attitude by law enforcement towards militia presence or activity.** In the context of the upcoming election, **swing states** are also at heightened risk, in line with scholarship around election violence and unrest being more common in competitive spaces. And lastly, **state capitals and 'periphery' towns** also remain important potential inflection points for violence, especially in more rural and suburban areas that have been particularly conducive to the foundation and regular activities of militia groups. Medium-population cities and suburban areas with centralized zones also serve as locations of major gravitational pull. Barriers to militia activity, meanwhile, can include locations with an overwhelming left-leaning population and/or large populations unsupportive of militias.

Based on these drivers and barriers, this report finds that capitals and peripheral towns, as well as medium-population cities and suburban areas with centralized zones, in **Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin,** and **Oregon** are at highest risk of increased militia activity in the election and post-election period, while **North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, California,** and **New Mexico** are at moderate risk. Spotlights on each of these states offer a glimpse into recent trends associated with militia activity in each context in recent months.

Key Conclusions

There has been a major realignment of militia movements in the US from anti-federal government writ large to mostly supporting one candidate, thereby generally positioning the militia movement alongside a political party. This has resulted in the further entrenchment of a connection between these groups' identities and politics under the Trump administration, with the intention of preserving and promoting a limited and warped understanding of US history and culture.

These armed groups engage in hybrid tactics. They train for urban and rural combat while also mixing public relations, propaganda works, and 'security operations' via both online and physical social platforms to engage those outside of the militia sphere. There is an increasing narrative and trend that groups are organizing to 'supplement' the work of law enforcement or to place themselves in a narrowly defined 'public protection' role in parallel with police departments of a given locale.

Ahead of the election, right-wing militia activity has been dominated by reactions to recent social justice activism like the Black Lives Matter movement, public health restrictions due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and other perceived threats to the 'liberty' and 'freedoms' of these groups.

And right-wing militia groups are often highly competitive with one another, but many have coalesced around this period of heightened political tension, and have even brought Proud Boys and QAnon-linked groups into the fold. While some groups have indicated that they are receptive to calls for deescalation and conflict avoidance, they remain vulnerable to hardline elements that may work clandestinely towards violent action aimed at dominating public space around the election.

Contents

Introduction & Key Trends **5**

Militias in the ACLED Dataset **7**

'Mainstream Militia': Groups most likely to align with US law enforcement 9

Three Percenters 10

Oath Keepers 10

Light Foot Militia 11

Civilian Defense Force and American Contingency 12

Right-Wing Street Movements: Highly active in brawls ***12***

Proud Boys 13

Patriot Prayer 14

Devolved Right-Wing Libertarian Groups: Highly-devolved groups, skeptical of state forces, with a history of conflict ***15***

Boogaloo Bois 15

People's Rights (Bundy Ranch) 16

Drivers and Barriers of Militia Activity **17**

States at risk of militia activity ***19***

States at highest risk ***19***

Georgia 19

Michigan 21

Pennsylvania 22

Wisconsin 23

Oregon 25

States at moderate risk ***26***

North Carolina 26

Texas 26

Virginia 27

California 28

New Mexico 29

Conclusion **29**

Authors

Hampton Stall is a conflict anthropologist with a Masters in Development Practice from Emory University. He researches armed and militant movements past and present in the US, Syria, Ireland, and elsewhere. He created and runs the MilitiaWatch blog (available online at Militia.Watch) where he combines data analysis, cultural contextualization, and current events to write about the movements and realignments of the militia world. MilitiaWatch is a blog for collecting analysis on US-based militia movements, from III% to Oath Keeper and everything in between. Through collection of open source and semi-public information on units, movements, and ideology, MilitiaWatch hosts contemporary and relevant articles on these groups.

Dr. Roudabeh Kishi is the Director of Research & Innovation at ACLED. She oversees the quality, production, and coverage of all ACLED data across the globe; leads research and analysis across regional teams; aids in new partnerships with local sources and users; and supports the capacity building of NGOs and conflict observatories around the world. Dr. Kishi holds a Ph.D. in Government and Politics from the University of Maryland with specializations in international relations and quantitative methodology.

Prof. Clionadh Raleigh is the Executive Director of ACLED. She is also Senior Professor of Political Violence and Geography in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex. Her primary research interests are the dynamics of conflict and violence, African political environments and elite networks.

Standing By: Right-Wing Militia Groups & the US Election

Militia groups and other armed non-state actors pose a serious threat to the safety and security of American voters. Throughout the summer and leading up to the general election, these groups have become more assertive, with activities ranging from intervening in protests to organizing kidnapping plots targeting elected officials (CNN, 13 October 2020). Both the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have specifically identified extreme far right-wing and racist movements as a primary risk factor heading into November, describing the election as a potential "flashpoint" for reactionary violence (The Nation, 30 September 2020; New York Times, 6 October 2020).

ACLED collects and analyzes information about the actions of state, non-state, and sole perpetrator violence[2] and demonstration activity. MilitiaWatch tracks, documents, and analyzes contemporary US militia movements, and provides reports connecting long-term militia trends to broader political events. ACLED and MilitiaWatch data indicate that right-wing militias have steadily ramped up their activities, and taken on an increasingly outsized profile within the national political environment. This joint report reviews the latest data on right-wing militia organizations across the country, identifying the most active groups and mapping the locations most likely to experience heightened militia activity before, during, and after the election.

Introduction & Key Trends

ACLED and MilitiaWatch have identified a major realignment of militia movements in the US from anti-federal government writ large to mostly supporting one candidate, thereby generally positioning the militia movement with a political party. This has resulted in the further entrenchment of a connection between these groups' identities and politics under the Trump administration, with the intention of preserving and promoting a limited and warped understanding of US history and culture.

We find that these armed groups engage in hybrid tactics. They train for urban and rural combat while also mixing public relations, propaganda works, and 'security operations' via both online and physical social platforms to engage those outside of the militia sphere. There is an increasing narrative and trend that groups are organizing to 'supplement' the work of law enforcement or to place themselves in a narrowly defined 'public protection' role in parallel with police departments of a given locale.

Ahead of the election, right-wing militia activity has been dominated by reactions to recent social justice activism like the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, public health restrictions due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and other perceived threats to the 'liberty' and 'freedoms' of these groups.

Right-wing militia groups are often highly competitive with one another, but many have coalesced around this period of heightened political tension, and have even brought Proud Boys (more information below) and QAnon-linked groups[3] into the fold. While some groups have indicated that they are receptive to calls

[2] ACLED tracks the activities of sole perpetrators in the US context though not in other contexts. For more, see this methodology primer.
[3] QAnon is a right-wing conspiracy theory that holds that President Trump is hindered by 'deep state actors' within the US government. It also claims that many members of the Democratic party elite are pedophiles and satan worshippers. In 2020, the loosely defined conspiratorial movement has pivoted to claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax.

for deescalation and conflict avoidance, they remain vulnerable to hardline elements that may work clandestinely towards violent action aimed at dominating public space (see, for example, Soufan Center, 19 October 2020).

The first section of this report introduces nine of the most active militias in the US and reviews their origins, goals, and core activities. While ACLED, through our partnership with MilitiaWatch, has tracked the activity of over 80 militias across the US in recent months, only a select number of these groups are highlighted below, for brevity; footnotes throughout the report offer more insight into some of the other active militias in the US. This report concentrates predominantly on right-wing militias, as this grouping has seen the most significant increase in their profile and activities in recent months.[4] Their actions, planned and executed, extend to the US election and beyond, and many of these groups have formed in reaction to other ongoing crises including pandemic shutdown orders and social justice movements. While some groups are localized, many engage in widespread activities throughout the US (see map below) and transcend state borders.

In the final section of the report, we explore a number of drivers of militia activity in order to identify areas at heightened risk of militia activity in the lead up to the vote, the election period itself, and its aftermath.

Non-Right-Wing Groups

Amid rising political tensions ahead of the election, groups have organized across the ideological spectrum. The vast majority of militias identified over the summer are right-wing, and their activity is widespread and growing. Left-wing militia activity is not as pronounced, and while the specter of 'Antifa' looms large in the public imagination, violent activities associated with this non-centralized movement have been minimal, and are often expressed in cyber actions (like doxxing), and with minimal rioting that typically does not involve threats or harm to individuals.

'Antifa'

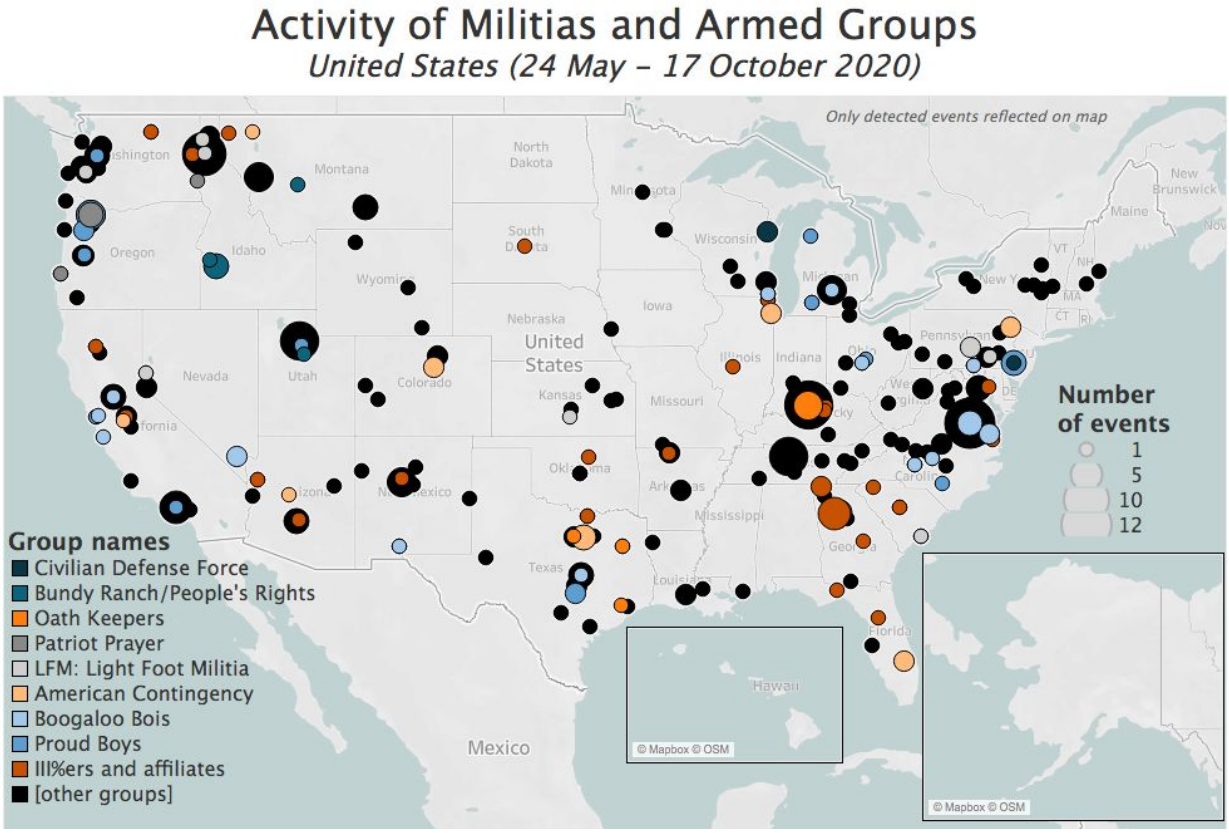
The loosely organized anti-fascist movement known as 'Antifa' engages in two primary activities relevant to the behavior under review in this report. Local and interstate networks of antifascists organize counter-mobilization against right-wing street organizing, including against many of the groups analyzed below. The majority of 'Antifa' energy is spent towards counterintelligence operations, primarily doxxing right-wing activists and organizing publicly and semi-publicly available information. Antifa-affiliated activists are also rarely armed and do not exhibit a pattern of recruitment, training, and integration into a chain-of-command, like most militia and armed groups.

Not Fucking Around Coalition

The Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC) is a burgeoning Black separatist movement that, in many ways, is a direct reaction to many of the groups analyzed below. The NFAC is an all-Black, armed activist movement started and led by an Atlanta DJ known as Grandmaster Jay. They have appeared in opposition to mostly-white right-wing militia movements and continue to call for retribution for Breonna Taylor's death at the hands of the Louisville police. While they clearly draw from and instrumentalize left-wing militant aesthetics (such as the Black Panther Party of the 1970s), they do not have an explicitly leftist political program. In the past months, the leader of the NFAC has begun to call for the establishment of a separatist Black ethnostate in Texas, and has attempted to align his movement with other Black armed movements like the New Black Panther Party (not affiliated with the original Panthers and widely disavowed by the same).

The NFAC have been active across at least three states and Washington, DC since the start of the summer, including in their 'home' state of Georgia; Kentucky, where they have shown up in Louisville in support of Breonna Taylor; and Louisiana. The group has shown up exclusively in the context of protests. For example, in late July, about 2,500 armed and 300 unarmed NFAC members held a rally in Louisville, Kentucky in support of the BLM movement, demanding justice for Breonna Taylor. The group was met by III%ers counter-protesting, resulting in verbal sparring between the two groups, though police in heavy riot gear kept both sides apart.

[4] It also remains highly likely that individuals or small groups not affiliated with an 'extremist' or 'radical' organization may engage in violence. The US is in a highly charged political moment, and even those with more 'mainstream' views may be inclined to escalate confrontations or commit violence in and around the election. These latent tendencies are difficult to track or predict, but our focus here is not to exclude or minimize the possibility of individual actions. However, the focus of this report is on specific groups and movements.



Militias in the ACLED Dataset

ACLED collects information on militias around the world and categorizes these groups as non-state armed movements with members affiliated by ideology, identity, or community. Globally, militias are responsible for more political violence than any other group, including governments, rebels, and insurgents. In many countries, militias operate at the behest of political figures to influence competition and competitors through attacks on candidates, supporters, 'rival' communities, and infrastructure. However, their actions transcend elections and episodes of political competition, and these groups frequently operate as a parallel violent fixture for political elites, parties, and interests. In some cases, these groups are kept 'on retainer' for political figures in and out of government for whom they commit acts of violence. In exchange for violence, these groups receive the patronage of political elites and impunity. Increasingly, militias who operate as the violent arm of a political movement engage in lucrative, criminal activity to supplement their incomes and 'use their skills.' They often have no clear political agenda and organize to promote a particular politicized identity or an ideology centered on an identity, and their short-term objective is to create violence and disorder across 'rival' communities.

These lessons on militias across the world are instructive in the US context. Although many US militias can be described as 'latent' in that they threaten more violence than they commit, several recently organized militias are associated with a right-wing ideology of extreme violence towards communities opposed to their rhetoric and demands for dominance and control. The lack of open sanctions of these groups from public figures and select local law enforcement has allowed them space to operate, while

concurrently allowing political figures to claim little direct responsibility for violent actions from which they hope to benefit.

In order to make a potential grouping of these armed organizations more cohesive and their distinctions more meaningful in terms of likely future actions, groups here are divided by their overall political posturing (initially presented in the table below). We include (1) 'mainstream militias,' or groups most likely to work with and alongside US law enforcement; (2) right-wing street movements, those that are highly active in fighting in physical space; and (3) highly devolved right-wing libertarian groups, those skeptical of state forces, with a history of conflict. Individual membership in these groups is not inflexible, and individuals regularly join, leave, and cross the organizations represented below, as well as other militias outside of the ones presented below. However, these groups provide an organizing framework that many potentially-violent actors may use in the coming weeks.

Large, cross-state, right-wing militia movements[5]

Name	Type	Est. Size	Active Spaces	History of violence	Potential for violence
Three Percenters	Mainstream militia	Large	Nationwide, organized at assorted intervals (depending upon group)	High	High
Oath Keepers	Mainstream militia	Moderate	Nationwide, mostly gathering on event basis	Moderate	Moderate
Light Foot Militia	Mainstream militia	Large	Nationwide, divided by region of state	Low	Moderate
Civilian Defense Force	Mainstream militia	Small	Nationwide, mostly online	Low	Low
American Contingency	Mainstream militia	Moderate	Nationwide, mostly online, divided by region	Low	Low
Proud Boys	Right-wing street movement	Large	Nationwide, especially near cities	Very High	Very High
Patriot Prayer	Right-wing street movement	Moderate	Pacific Northwest and West Coast	High	High
Boogaloo Bois	Devolved right-wing libertarian	Moderate	Nationwide, highly devolved	Very High	Very High
People's Rights	Devolved right-wing libertarian	Large	Nationally dispersed, broken down into sub-state regions	Low	Moderate

[5] Local chapters or local community militias are not represented here.

‘Mainstream Militia’: Groups most likely to align with US law enforcement

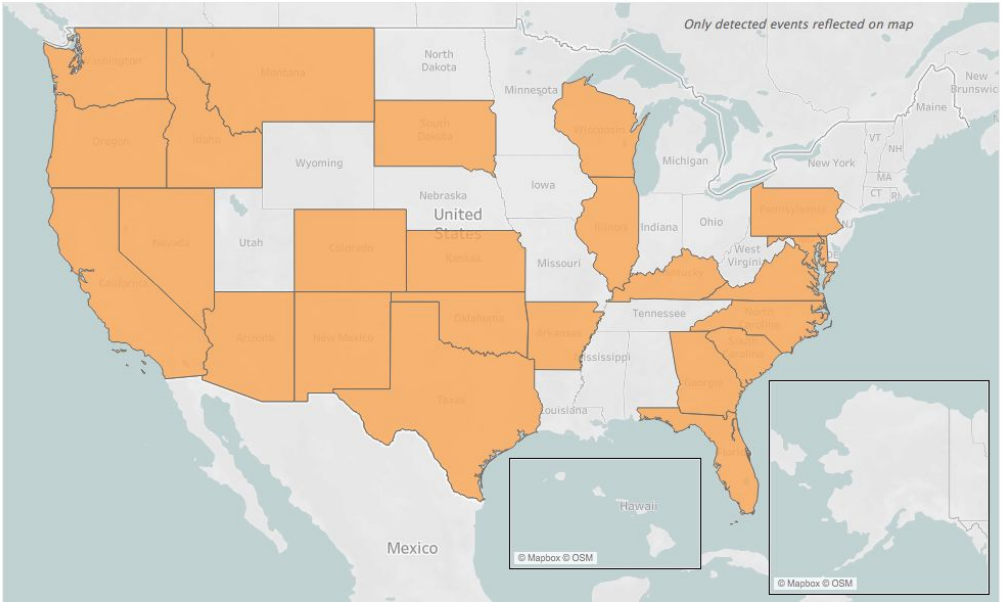
The ‘mainstream militia’ classification applies to a broad range of armed right-wing groups that are well-documented in the last decade and beyond. They operate with some level of structure, schedule, and strategy and engage in a number of different types of activities. Primary activities during the period covered by this report include providing and supplementing ‘public security’ efforts in modalities that are almost exclusively through counter-demonstrations. While these groups often define their operations in terms of defense of the public and protecting businesses, they are almost always aligned towards a particular political view. From this standpoint, through which they often see police and the US military as allies, their implicit goals overlap with preserving the long-term dominant culture of the US, largely perceived as traditionally pro-white and patriarchal systems of production and governance. Many of these groups claim to be always ready and always watching, yet exhibit a pattern of activation in reaction to calls for justice or equity for non-white Americans.

There are new undercurrents impacting this group of actors, such as the ‘new militia’ organizing capacity that two actors here represent (American Contingency and Civil Defense Force, detailed below). These new trends include a focus on sharing ‘intel’ on potential and active protests, an emphasis on communication across great distances via social media sites, and a generally more cautious approach towards mobilizing without a clear reason.

This section reviews the following ‘mainstream militia’ groups: the Three Percenters, the Oath Keepers, the Light Foot Militia, the Civilian Defense Force, and the American Contingency. The map below denotes states in which the activities of these groups have been detected in recent months.

States Home to 'Mainstream Militias'

United States (24 May – 17 October 2020)



Three Percenters

The Three Percenters (III%ers) movement is a broad set of splinter movements based upon a shared foundational and historically discredited myth that only three percent of the residents of the Thirteen Colonies took up arms against the British. They were organized in 2008 after former President Barack Obama's ascendance to the presidency and declared they were established to fight against "tyranny." In 2008, conservative fears of the first Black president of the US, potential new gun regulation, chances at higher taxes, and the economic downturn of the Great Recession created an environment rife for right-wing militia development. This moment was seized upon by Michael Brian Vanderboegh, who led the Sons of Liberty militia in the 1990s and co-founded the armed Three Percent movement in 2008 amidst a rising current of Tea Party nationalism. Vanderboegh died in 2016, well after the III% movement had grown far beyond his command (Southern Poverty Law Center, 10 August 2016).

In the years since Trump's election in 2016, the III% movement has maintained their opposition to gun regulation as 'government tyranny,' but also often operate in defense of the state. Most members are actively pro-Trump. During this time, the III% movement has been marked extensively by internal upheaval, splinters, and drama between both leaders and rank-and-file members (MilitiaWatch, 11 September 2020). The III% label now refers to a combination of disparate and disassociated militia chapters, including the Security Force III%, the III% Defence Militia, the III% United Patriots, the American Patriots III%, the III% Originals, the Real III%, and more. In many ways, the label 'III%' represents less a cohesive, singular militia movement and more a branding and political pole around which individual chapters and movements are oriented (MilitiaWatch, 15 June 2019).

The III%ers and their various splinters have been active in at least 19 states since the start of summer 2020. They are especially present in Georgia, where over a quarter of all activity involving these groups is reported. In some cases they have been present at protests without engaging. In other cases they have directly intervened in demonstrations, both with and without the use of violence. In several recent events they have operated to counter social justice demonstrations: in August, for example, heavily armed militia, including the Arkansas American Patriots III%, showed up at a march against racism and in support of the BLM movement, organized by Ozarks Hate Watch and Bridge the Gap NWA in Zinc, northern Arkansas. The militia was present to block the protesters' access to a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) compound, on request of the KKK to 'provide security.' According to the protesters, "one militia member kept pointing her rifle at the crowd with her finger on the trigger," though no physical confrontation was reported (Insider, 4 August 2020). In addition to involvement in demonstrations, a number of training exercises have been reported across Georgia, Maryland, and Illinois.

Oath Keepers

The Oath Keepers are a militia movement organized to maintain the "oath" sworn by police officers and members of the military to protect the US from enemies "foreign and domestic." Like the III%ers, detailed above, the Oath Keepers were founded out of the same political, social, and economic context of conservative reaction against the election of former President Obama. The group concentrates on recruiting active and retired officers from both the police forces and the armed forces of the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 18 September 2015). The group's founder and leader, Stewart Rhodes, is a US Army veteran and Yale Law School graduate.

The Oath Keepers have a history of conspiratorial and highly aggressive reaction to currents in US politics. For example, in 2013 they formed a new corps of militia gatherings referred to as "Citizen Preservation" groups to counter encroachment by the "New World Order" (Daily Beast, 15 October 2013). After Trump's victory at the polls in 2016, the Oath Keepers have struggled to find their ideological footing, and were in direct conflict with members of the Alt-Right during part of 2017's surge in Alt-Right street activism (Southern Poverty Law Center, 15 June 2017). However, in the immediate contemporary, the Oath Keepers have once again taken a more hardline right-wing stance. Stewart Rhodes was removed from Twitter after actively calling for violence after Aaron 'Jay' Danielson of Patriot Prayer was shot and killed in Portland (more on this incident below) (Yahoo! News, 10 September 2020).

The Oath Keepers have been active in Kentucky and Texas since the start of the summer. The majority of their activity has been in support of law enforcement in the form of presence at, yet not direct engagement in, protests. For example, for three nights in a row in late September, the Oath Keepers were present in Louisville, Kentucky in which they 'guarded' storefronts, businesses, and gas stations from demonstrators associated with the BLM movement who had gathered to support justice for Breonna Taylor. Taylor, a 26-year old Black woman and paramedic, was killed by police last March during a botched raid on her apartment (New York Times, 1 September 2020).

In Texas, the Oath Keepers have been more directly engaged in demonstrations. In late July, in Weatherford, outside of Fort Worth, members of the Oath Keepers were present in support of pro-statue demonstrators, who had shown up to counter groups calling for the removal of a Confederate monument located at the county courthouse grounds. The next day, in Tyler, an hour and a half east of Dallas, Oath Keepers armed with semi-automatic rifles were present in support of a 'Back the Blue' rally. The rally was counter to a concurrent rally showing solidarity for protesters in Portland who had been in a standoff with federal agents for over a week and to register new Democratic voters. As such, Democratic congressional candidate Hank Gilbert was also present and slotted to speak. A heavily armed Rusk town councilman, Martin Holsome, who is 'aligned' with the Oath Keepers and other militias, was present as well alongside the Back the Blue rally. The demonstration turned violent when counter-demonstrators aligned with the Back the Blue rally instigated a physical altercation as Gilbert started his speech, while others of the group created a 'military-style defensive formation' (Washington Post, 27 August 2020). Three people were reportedly injured, though no arrests were reported. One of those injured was a top aide for Gilbert; Gilbert noted that he had asked law enforcement to become involved and to allow for their scheduled demonstration, but to no avail (Washington Post, 27 August 2020). More recently, the Oath Keepers have held recruitment events in Texas, including in Houston.

Light Foot Militia

The Light Foot Militia (LFM) is a national militia gathering oriented around a purported 'Constitutionalist' and 'apolitical' approach. Unlike the III% movement, the LFM has remained mostly cohesive as a national movement and has maintained a devolved organizational structure by placing emphasis on local and regional chapters rather than a national gathering. They place less emphasis on a national leadership structure, yet maintain a national-level identity aesthetically and in their operations. Each of the 86 identified chapters of LFM has its own particular political and social character, with some of the chapters taking a more anti-left or anti-BLM stance than others, but the LFM claims to remain focused on security and observation operations rather than gathering to demonstrate themselves.

The LFM was one of the major militia players at the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, but several prominent leaders of the militia have referred to their involvement as a mistake (The Guardian, 15 August 2017). Prior to their presence on the ground for this event, they claim to have coordinated with local police, which was not always the case for other groups that travelled to Charlottesville. Some of the larger chapters of the LFM, like the Pennsylvania Light Foot Militia (MilitiaWatch, 24 March 2017), have seen staffing changes since Charlottesville and the previous *de facto* leader of the group has since disassociated with the movement.

The LFM has been active since late May in at least six states across the country, including in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Idaho, Nevada, Kansas, and Washington. The majority of their activity has involved the group being present at, yet not directly engaging in, protests. For example, in July, the LFM was present at a protest associated with the BLM movement in Pennsylvania to 'patrol' and to 'prevent violence' between counter-demonstrators. That same month, the group was present in Charleston, South Carolina to 'protect' a Confederate monument during a counter-demonstration. In addition to presence at protests, the group — especially the Kootenai County division in northern Idaho — has also engaged in public meetings for field exercises or shooting practice at gun ranges.

Civilian Defense Force *and* American Contingency

The Civilian Defense Force (CDF) and American Contingency (AmCon) groups are recently formed armed right-wing activist brands or formation patterns that combine a central national command with highly-devolved local, state, and regional commands. These are grouped together because they both represent the same current within the armed right of the US, and in many cases draw from the same pool of recruits (likely with much overlap between members). Both groups were formed with the explicit agenda to counter protests across the US this past summer, and they decry a failure of the 'traditional' US.

Both the CDF and AmCon rely heavily on shared branding and fairly broad ideological framing of active conservative involvement in response to anti-police and pro-BLM protests. The CDF maintains a much smaller presence and relies primarily on gathering intelligence on protest events happening around the country. AmCon has a larger reach and is often used for sharing of 'intelligence' on left-wing and BLM protests planned in particular regions, but also has a complementary weapons and tactics training program built into a partner company run by the same team.

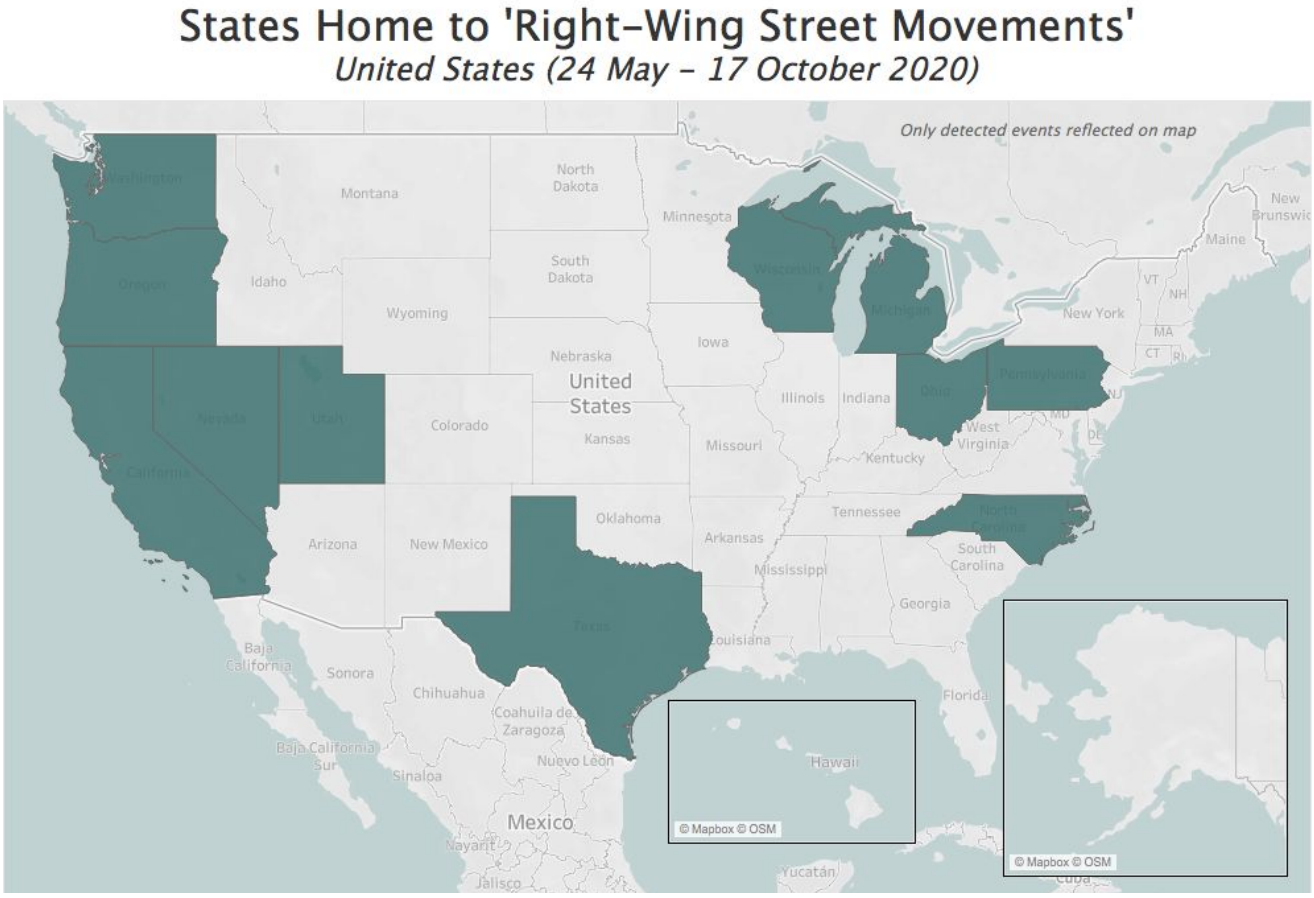
Both the CDF and AmCon have been active in Pennsylvania since the beginning of the summer. The CDF has additionally been active in Wisconsin, while AmCon has also been active in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Montana, and Texas. AmCon has been holding a number of training events in recent months — including pistol training and training around carbine use, nearly all of which have been to a sold-out audience — and recruitment events, such as 'meet-and-greets.' The CDF has held similar training and recruitment events.

Right-Wing Street Movements: Highly active in brawls

Right-wing street movements represent the bulk of recorded direct, personal violence from both this summer and previous years. These movements are highly masculine, often staffed by a younger core membership, and participate in spectacular violence while running savvy public relations campaigns to a press corps that often does not understand their real goals. Many members of these movements revel at

the idea of brawling in the street and have expressly indicated that they enjoy fighting with groups like Antifa, for whom many of these organizations were formed to provoke. In order to remain publicly acceptable, these groups will often describe themselves either in many layers of irony or as something they are not, such as a solely Christian or conservative movement.

Leading groups in this category include the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer. The map below denotes states in which the activities of these groups have been detected in recent months.



Proud Boys

The Proud Boys are a fascist youth movement oriented towards street-fighting. Their ideology is to 'defend western chauvinism.' The group is right-wing and anti-left in nature and has had several members convicted for violence. They were created by VICE News founder Gavin McInnes who has since backed away from the group (The Guardian, 22 November 2018). The Proud Boys rely heavily on jokes and silliness to downplay the group's proclivity for violence, both threatened and real. The current *de facto* leader of the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrio, is also the Florida director of 'Latinos for Trump' (CNN, 1 October 2020).

The Proud Boys are evolving into a more militant organization. Groups of young men increasingly show up to Proud Boys events with rifles and plate carriers. Their members have actively attacked journalists that they deem "Antifa media" at their events and have also begun to join militias such as the III%ers over the past two years (Detroit News, 17 September 2020). After President Trump's "stand back, stand by"

comments, Proud Boys chapters drafted up images with the phrase superimposed over their usual logo for sale on t-shirts and other merchandise (Mediaite, 30 September 2020).

The Proud Boys have been active in events across at least 11 states, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Oregon, since the start of the summer. They have been present, yet not engaged, in protests, though have also intervened in demonstrations, both with and without the use of violence. In late September, for example, approximately 1,000 Proud Boys and Trump supporters gathered in Delta Park in Portland, Oregon to hold an "End Antifa" rally in support of President Trump's re-election campaign, and to call for an end to 'domestic terrorism.' One of the Proud Boys attacked a blogger, pushing them to the floor and kicking them in the face, while three other demonstrators were issued criminal citations for possession of loaded firearms in public.

Patriot Prayer

Patriot Prayer is a right-wing Christian street movement organized to actively confront leftist street movements on the American West Coast. Joey Gibson, the founder of Patriot Prayer, was indicted on charges of inciting a street riot at an anarchist hangout in Portland on May Day in 2019 (OPB, 22 August 2019). While Gibson describes himself as a "moderate" and his group as a "conservative Christian organization," Patriot Prayer's actions — as well as the alliances it has made with other right-wing organizations — indicate the group acts to the far right of these claims (Vox, 8 September 2020).

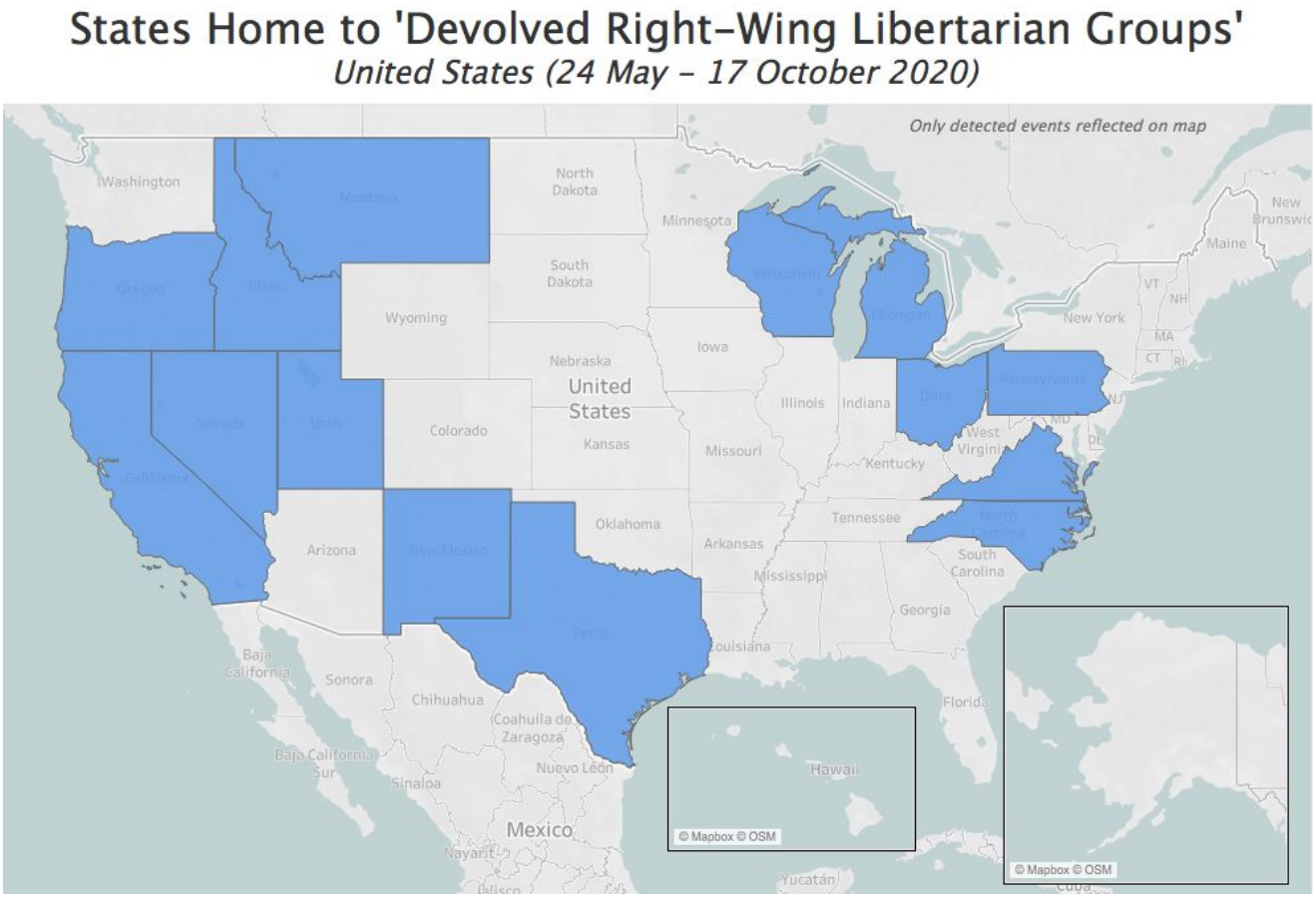
Patriot Prayer has been active exclusively in the Pacific Northwest since the start of the summer, with activity centered in Oregon and Washington. The group has engaged in demonstrations, both peaceful and violent. Perhaps their highest profile engagement took place in late August in Portland, Oregon, when hundreds of vehicles formed a caravan demonstration in support of President Trump, alongside the Proud Boys and the III%ers. During that rally, the combined militia groups used pepper spray and shot paintball guns at counter-demonstrators rallying in support of the BLM movement and against police brutality, as well as at journalists. They also intentionally drove their trucks through crowds of counter-demonstrators who had tried to block the streets (NBC, 30 August 2020). Amidst the clashes, a member of Patriot Prayer, Aaron 'Jay' Danielson, was shot and killed by an unknown opposing activist. Authorities later identified a suspect, Michael Reinoehl, who was killed by a federal task force in September (USA Today, 4 September 2020). Law enforcement initially claimed that Reinoehl was armed, but subsequent evidence has emerged suggesting that he "wasn't obviously armed" and that the authorities shot him without warning (Washington Post, 10 September 2020; New York Times, 13 October 2020). Since then, President Trump has appeared to celebrate the alleged extrajudicial killing (CNN, 15 October 2020).

While Patriot Prayer has remained fairly quiet in recent weeks following the Portland shooting, its members are likely still energized from the summer of activity in the Pacific Northwest. Gibson, the founder and leader of the group, has recently become involved with Ammon Bundy's newest project, the People's Rights organization (introduced below) (IREHR, 13 October 2020).

Devolved Right-Wing Libertarian Groups: Highly-devolved groups, skeptical of state forces, with a history of conflict

Devolved right-wing libertarian groups are often among the most difficult to track despite holding perhaps the most aggressive end goals. These groups are highly primed for a civil conflict they believe is likely to break out in the future, though many have extremely different views on the subject. These groups mostly operate in terms of hyper-local cells and short-range networks, but should also be considered highly responsive to news and current events. This means that these groups may react at a moment's notice, well before the specifics of a news story or political event are made fully clear.

This category includes groups like the Boogaloo Bois and People's Rights. The map below denotes states in which the activities of these groups have been detected in recent months.



Boogaloo Bois

The Boogaloo Bois are the adherents to a diverse set of neo-dadaist armed aesthetics and modalities aimed at setting off or preparing for the second American Civil War. They regard the likelihood of another war as inevitable. Some Boogaloo Bois are explicitly right-wing while others have attempted to infiltrate and use BLM protests as a way to accelerate the political situation towards mass violence. The Boogaloo meme originates from right-wing weapons boards on 4chan's /k/ but has seen much larger appeal among absurdist libertarian armed activists since. The Boogaloo is not a cohesive group nor is there a meaningful

central ending ideology beyond commitment to a methodology of political change: that of civil war (or the "Boogaloo"). People who identify as "Boogaloo Bois" are almost always right-wing, though often they are situated in contention with the right-wing supporters of the police and Donald Trump (Southern Poverty Law Center, 5 June 2020).

Some Boogaloo Bois have also positioned themselves as pro-BLM or in support of anti-fascist protest movements. However, some of these same individuals have also been documented expressing far-right racist views, for example, expressing support for white nationalist dream-state Rhodesia or in sharing neo-Nazi irony memes online (Bellingcat, 27 May 2020). It is also the case that some police departments, such as that of Newport News, Virginia, have sought to get along with and make concessions to local Boogaloo cells.

The Boogaloo Bois have been active across at least 11 states since the start of the summer. Given their non-cohesive nature, their activities span different regions of the country. In addition to demonstrations, the Boogaloo Bois have also engaged in armed clashes with law enforcement, in line with their stated agenda of police opposition. In late May, for example, two alleged members of the Boogaloo Bois fired from a vehicle on federal officers working security at a protest associated with the BLM movement in Oakland, California, killing one and injuring a second. The following week, an armed clash ensued between police and a Boogaloo Bois member in Santa Cruz, California, where a police officer was shot dead. During that same time period, at least three members of the Boogaloo Bois were arrested in Las Vegas, Nevada when they arrived at a demonstration associated with the BLM movement armed with weapons and Molotov cocktails, with alleged intentions to escalate the situation by attacking people. Their involvement in demonstrations was further thrust into the limelight around the events that unfolded in Kenosha, Wisconsin in late August. On the night of 25 August, about 1,000 demonstrators gathered outside the courthouse in support of the BLM movement and to protest the shooting of Jacob Blake by police days earlier. A teenager, Kyle Rittenhouse, had responded to a 'call-to-action' by the Kenosha Guard[6] on Facebook and joined a security detail including the Kenosha Guard and local Boogaloo Bois (though he reportedly was not a member of either group) when he shot and killed two demonstrators and injured another (New York Times, 16 October 2020).

People's Rights (Bundy Ranch)

Ammon Bundy and the residents of the Bundy Ranch (past and present) have recently reorganized a highly devolved "Uber for militias" called the People's Rights organization. While Ammon Bundy has previously 'disavowed' the US militia movement, he has reorganized a similar armed rapid-response network based upon right-wing libertarian principles. He has helped to establish People's Rights organizations across 16 states that are divided up by regions (Missoula Current, 28 August 2020). Given that much of their current work is in preparation for activation rather than to protest in the street, they have only appeared in ACLED data in three states this summer. However, these groups, detailed in a report by the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR), represent a highly devolved and local organized militant group that could be activated at Bundy's call fairly quickly (IREHR, 13 October 2020).

[6] The Kenosha Guard is a militia gathering that was created this summer and that has relied heavily on 'muster call' actions, thereby bringing in dozens of people from outside of the militia leadership's specific social sphere.

The activities of the Bundy Ranch (and hence expected activity of the People's Rights) have been centered predominantly in the northwest, specifically in Idaho, Montana, and Utah. In August, protesters led by Ammon Bundy held demonstrations for multiple days in a row in Boise, Idaho to demand an end to coronavirus mask mandates, the lifting of the current state of emergency, and to oppose a proposal that would limit the civil liability for businesses, schools, and governments. The special legislative session in the statehouse was interrupted when a glass door was shattered and armed protesters rushed into the gallery. On the second day of the special legislative session, when the protesters showed up again, Ammon Bundy, amongst others, was arrested. Bundy was also arrested the following day when he and his followers showed up yet again to the special legislative session. Earlier that month, Bundy, alongside Shawna Cox, another libertarian activist, led a protest against the mandatory use of face coverings in response to the coronavirus pandemic in Orem, Utah, outside Provo.

Drivers and Barriers of Militia Activity

While militia activity has been reported in at least 34 states and Washington, DC since late May 2020, there are specific locations at heightened risk of militia activity during the upcoming election period and its immediate aftermath. These assessments are made based on trends in the data and information collected by ACLED and MilitiaWatch, as well as by taking into account a variety of drivers and barriers to militia activity.

For example, locations that have seen **substantial engagement in anti-coronavirus lockdown protests** are at heightened risk. This stems from the direct link between state authority and the imposition of such restrictions, which challenges the ideals of many of the groups introduced above. These protests also serve as crucial network-building events for right-wing activists to re-activate for other protests and counter-demonstrations.

Also at risk are places where militias might have **perceptions of 'leftist coup' activities**. While 'leftist coup' activities are poorly defined among armed movements, they can be understood as fear of organized left-wing activism against right-wing activity. Protests organized by and around BLM, or places where anti-BLM activists may fear Antifa activity, are also at a heightened risk of militia activity. Leaders of militias often refer to BLM activists as "Marxists" (The Atlantic, November 2020). It is important to note that the 'leftist coup' phenomenon is not founded in any real detectable dynamics, and appears to rather be related more to endemic paranoia among many of the armed militias of the US.

Spaces where militias have been active in setting up **recruitment drives or holding training for members** are also at high risk. Even if militias are not engaging in demonstrations, for example, such organization around recruitment and training indicates a highly mobilized contingency that can be easily activated. Evidence of these events likely speaks to much greater preparedness training aimed at both response to protest movements and a potential escalation around the election. Training events also serve to reify group identity and membership by placing individual members in situations in which they train to work together as a unit and further normalize their political views in conversation with 'like minded' individuals. Such information is notoriously difficult to track, however. Some groups, for example, may claim to train every other weekend, but unless researchers at MilitiaWatch or ACLED can find confirmation of such training actually occurring, it is not coded, per ACLED methodology. Similarly, a great deal of organizing of such events occurs on the individual-to-individual level; this makes tracking

such information across all militias by researchers and journalists nearly impossible. When such information around recruitment and training can be verified, it is recorded by researchers at MilitiaWatch or ACLED and is included in the ACLED dataset; this means that such information is almost surely underreported in the data and should be assumed to be a conservative estimate.[7]

In spaces where militia members cultivate **personal relationships with police or law enforcement**, there is likely to be increased militia activity. **A friendly attitude by law enforcement towards militia presence or activity** has been seen at protests across the US (The Intercept, 19 June 2020). These relationships are fostered for multiple reasons, including in contexts where police presence is limited due to staffing shortages (i.e. retirements, resignations). In such cases, the likelihood that police may welcome the 'extra help' in 'keeping the peace' is expected to bolster militia activity.

In line with scholarship around election violence and unrest, militia activity is expected to be higher in competitive spaces — such as in **swing states**. In election violence studies, different groups and agendas shape the risk and geography of violence at key stages in the election cycle. In the pre-election cycle, armed groups may operate in conjunction with the incumbent's party to repress opposition candidates and supporters. In these spaces, the objective is to alter the narrow margins of victory in favor of 'their' candidate. For example, there has been increasing engagement by right-wing militias in conjunction with pro-Trump rallies — such as at the pro-Trump caravan demonstration, which devolved into violence engaging with supporters of the BLM movement, involving the Proud Boys, III%ers, and Patriot Prayer, in Portland, Oregon on 29 August. During the election period, armed groups may try to monitor polling centers, potentially stifling voters. Multiple reports detail the fear and alarm of officials and voters at the prospect of armed groups showing up to polling centers on Election Day (Business Insider, 12 October 2020). Statements issued by militia groups and their members, such as Stewart Rhodes, the leader of the Oath Keepers, that militias would "be out on Election Day to protect people who are voting" (LA Times, 10 October 2020) reinforce those fears. Post-election, these groups will pivot their focus to vote counts. Activity involving armed groups in such contexts is often pinned to the margins of election results, especially if their preferred candidate does not win. Claims by members of groups like the Proud Boys that "if Trump doesn't get re-elected … is when you're going to see a civil war" are particularly worrying (BET, 12 October 2020). Rhetoric from President Trump suggesting that the election could be 'rigged' adds further fuel to this fire (Financial Times, 12 October 2020; New York Times, 15 October 2020; NBC, 15 October 2020).

State capitals and 'periphery' towns also remain important potential inflection points for violence, as they provide a natural coalescence point, especially in more rural and suburban areas that have been particularly conducive to the foundation and regular activities of militia groups. Medium-population cities and suburban areas with centralized zones — such as parks, main streets, and plazas — also serve as locations of major gravitational pull. These locations are potentially fertile grounds for violence from the

[7] Per ACLED methodology, these events are coded with event type *Strategic developments*. The *Strategic developments* event type within the ACLED dataset is unique from other event types in that it captures significant developments beyond both physical violence directed at individuals or armed groups as well as demonstrations involving the physical congregation of individuals. Because what types of events may be significant varies by context as well as over time, these events are, by definition, not systematically coded. One action may be significant in one country at a specific time yet a similar action in a different country or even in the same country during a different time period might not have the same significance. This means that *Strategic developments* events should not be assumed to be cross-context and -time comparable as other ACLED event types can be. (For more, see this ACLED methodology primer.) Given the sourcing limitations around militia recruitment and training events, they should be treated in the same way, and are hence coded as such.

groups identified in this report. This is especially true in contexts where groups are able to draw from a large population outside of the primary location, and in places that can be easily accessed from these hinterland and suburban regions.

Barriers to militia activity, meanwhile, can include locations with an overwhelming left-leaning population and/or large populations unsupportive of militias. Within these parameters, a location like Albany, New York would be more likely to see violence related to the right-wing armed movements we have identified, while New York City would remain less likely.

States at risk of militia activity

Taking these drivers and barriers into account, capitals and peripheral towns, as well as medium-population cities and suburban areas with centralized zones, in **Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin,** and **Oregon** are deemed to be at highest risk of increased militia activity in the election and post-election period. Meanwhile, **North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, California,** and **New Mexico** are found to be at moderate risk.

States at highest risk

Georgia

Georgia is a swing state in both the presidential election — in which polls place Trump and Biden virtually neck and neck (New York Times, 16 October 2020) — as well as two senate races.[8] Private groups are barred from "forming themselves together as a military unit or parade or demonstrate in public with firearms" according to Georgia law (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 15 October 2020), yet a number of militias have been active across the state in recent months. These include splinters of the Three Percenters (III%ers) — including national splinters like the III% Security Force and the III% American Brotherhood of Patriots as well as local splinters like the Georgia III% Martyrs[9] — and groups such as the Georgia Militia, the 229 Militia, and the NFAC.

Demonstrations associated with the BLM movement have made up the majority — 61% — of demonstration events in Georgia since the killing of George Floyd in late May. These demonstrations spiked shortly after Floyd's murder, and again shortly after the killing of Rayshard Brooks in mid-June in Atlanta. Brooks, a Black man, was shot and killed by police after being confronted for sleeping in a car outside of a fast food restaurant; authorities claim Brooks took an officer's taser and ran away, when they opened fire, shooting him in the back.

[8] Republican Senator David Perdue is seeking re-election against Democratic candidate Jon Ossoff. Meanwhile, a special election is being held following Senator Johnny Isakson's resignation at the end of 2019. Governor Kemp appointed Republican Kelly Loeffler as his replacement at the time; Loeffler is now running for election against a number of other candidates (no primary was held). Frontrunners in that race include Loeffler, Republican Doug Collins, and Democrat Raphael Warnock; if no candidate receives a majority of votes during the November election, the top two finishers will advance to a runoff, to be held in early January 2021.

[9] The Georgia III% Martyrs appear to have rebranded as the Georgia III% Guardians. Despite the group claiming to be a distinct one from the Martyrs brand, the leadership of the newer Guardians is essentially the same.

Demonstrations have also become increasingly partisan, with a number involving militias, both for and against the BLM movement. For example, on 4 July, about 100 to 200 people from the NFAC marched in Stone Mountain Park in Stone Mountain, outside Atlanta, to protest systemic racism and white nationalism. Concurrently, other groups, including the Georgia III% Martyrs, looked on. Stone Mountain Park is home to the largest Confederate memorial in the country. Meanwhile, on 15 August, several dozen members of III%ers groups, many armed and carrying Confederate battle flags, demonstrated in Stone Mountain in support of keeping Confederate symbols in the city and to show their support for President Trump. They were met with anti-racist and Antifa demonstrators who held a counter-protest. Other groups, including the NAACP, and far-left anarchists and socialists, some of them heavily armed, also participated in the demonstration, many wearing BLM shirts. After hours of shouting and the burning of a Confederate flag, the event devolved into scuffles and pepper spraying amongst the demonstrators, with minimal serious injuries reported. Police, backed by a SWAT team and the Georgia National Guard, intervened and dispersed demonstrators from both sides. In another example several weeks later, on 3 September, about two dozen people gathered near the courthouse in downtown Dublin, two hours southeast of Atlanta. Protesters demonstrated against the city's Confederate monument, holding BLM signs. They were met with counter-protesters holding flags supporting President Trump, which included some militia members who arrived due to a call to action by the III% Security Force.

In addition to demonstrations associated with the BLM movement, protests related to the coronavirus pandemic are also reported across Georgia. The state has faced persistent tensions over the coronavirus response. In July, Democratic Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms was sued over her executive order requiring people to wear masks in the city by Republican Governor Brian Kemp, who alleged that her policy violated his executive order which 'strongly encouraged' yet did not mandate mask-wearing in the state (NPR, 28 July 2020). Kemp eventually dropped the lawsuit against Bottoms after judge-ordered mediation. Since mid-September, the proportion of demonstrations in Georgia directly related to the coronavirus pandemic has been increasing. The largest percentage of these have involved teachers, students, and parents around the reopening of schools. Georgia was one of the first states to reopen schools — a process that was marred by reports of thousands of students and staff being forced to quarantine after exposure to the coronavirus (Newsweek, 14 August 2020). Militia members have demonstrated to express disapproval of coronavirus restrictions, though most have so far remained peaceful. In early September, for example, about 20 people, including some who claimed to be members of a militia, gathered outside of the Gordon County Courthouse in Calhoun, an hour northwest of Atlanta, expressing aggravation over the pandemic, amongst other concerns.

Militias have also engaged in other activities, outside of demonstrations, in the state. At least five training exercises and at least three recruitment drives have been held by militias in Georgia in recent months. For example, on 8 August, about 13 people from the Georgia Security Force III% attended a field training exercise, featuring target practice in the woods. On 22 August, the 229 Militia[10] hosted a recruitment event in Quitman, southern Georgia.

These activities come at a time when law enforcement is stretched thin. In September, department records suggested that resignations from the Atlanta Police Department had doubled in the three months prior (The Center Square, 6 September 2020), with about 140 officer resignations, a 75% increase relative

[10] The 229 Militia is an otherwise unaffiliated militia that is organized out of the 229 area code, using popular militia forum MyMilitia to recruit and call on its members.

to the previous year (Washington Post, 18 September 2020). As of 10 October, it has been over two weeks since ACLED has recorded law enforcement engaging demonstrators in Georgia, despite continued protests across the state. Since the start of the summer, involvement by state forces in demonstrations has been limited. In this context, militias may be compelled to 'step up,' with groups making statements indicating that "if the police can't handle it, we will step in" (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 15 October 2020). In June, for example, members of the Georgia III% Martyrs claimed in their voice communications to one another to have 'stood with police' against protesters associated with the BLM movement in Morrow, outside Atlanta. In mid-September, the Georgia III% Martyrs provided security for Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler (engaged in a Senate race) and House of Representatives candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene in Ringgold, northern Georgia.

Michigan

Like Georgia, Michigan is a swing state in both the presidential election as well as in Senate elections for the seat of incumbent Democrat Gary Peters The state has made headlines following the foiled kidnapping attempt, and possible assassination attempt, of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer on 8 October. The FBI has charged and arrested a number of men, including members of the local Michigan Wolverine Watchmen militia,[11] who had met repeatedly over the summer for firearms training, combat drills, and explosives practice. Militias have been active across the state, including the Proud Boys, the Michigan Liberty Militia,[12] and the Michigan Home Guard.[13] In light of this activity, tensions run high. Recent reports note that Black gun ownership is at an "all-time high" and continues to rise over concerns of racial violence (Atlanta Black Star, 15 October 2020).

Also like Georgia, since mid-September, the proportion of demonstrations directly related to the coronavirus pandemic has been on the rise. Michigan experienced some of the earliest reopen protests. In April, hundreds of armed protesters, some armed, gathered inside the state capitol in Lansing as lawmakers discussed an extension of Governor Whitmer's request to extend emergency powers in response to the pandemic (Guardian, 30 April 2020). The demonstrators protested against Whitmer's stay-at-home mandate, which had been extended in response to rising COVID-19 cases (BBC, 1 May 2020).

In addition to pandemic-related protests, demonstrations associated with the BLM movement have also been prevalent. Approximately 73% of all demonstrations in Michigan since Floyd's killing have been associated with the BLM movement. The Proud Boys are the most active group in the state, engaging in a number of demonstrations associated with the BLM movement. On 6 June, for example, while over 2,000 people protested in Traverse City, northwest Michigan, in support of the BLM movement, the Proud Boys held a counter-protest in support of the Second Amendment. On 15 August, members of the Proud Boys demonstrated in support of police in Kalamazoo, visibly armed with a variety of weapons. A counter-protest was held by anti-fascists in support of the BLM movement. The demonstration resulted in physical fights between the demonstrators before police arrived, using pepper spray and arresting some

[11] The Michigan Wolverine Watchmen are a militia movement that was allegedly organized towards the kidnapping and 'trial' of the Michigan governor and drew from the legacy of the Michigan Militia and Michigan Militia Wolverines Corp for its own particular splinter.
[12] The Michigan Liberty Militia is an otherwise unaffiliated local militia organization out of Michigan that has been highly involved in armed right-wing organizing in the state this summer.
[13] The Michigan Home Guard is an otherwise unaffiliated local militia organization out of Michigan that has been highly involved in armed right-wing organizing in the state this summer.

protesters. On 17 September, protesters including the Proud Boys amongst other militias, showed up armed and wearing plate carriers in Lansing to protest against gun control measures.

In Michigan, there have been reports of resignations and suspensions of police chiefs, like the resignation of Lowell Police Chief Steve Bukala (Mlive, 5 June 2020) or the suspension of Detroit-area police chief Robert Shelide (Detroit News, 16 June 2020) both in June. As of mid-October, there have been no reports of law enforcement engagement in demonstrations in over either weeks, and involvement by government authorities in demonstrations has been limited to under 5% of demonstrations since the start of the summer. When police have engaged in demonstrations, however, they have used force — such as firing less-lethal weapons like tear gas, rubber bullets, and pepper spray or beating demonstrators with batons — at least 65% of the time.

Armed vigilantes have filled this gap in some instances. On 12 June, for example, while hundreds of people gathered in Lambertville, an hour outside Detroit, in association with the BLM movement to protest against an owner of a gun store for racist comments made on Facebook, a number of armed community members were present on the roof of the gun store to 'keep the peace' and to make sure that no looting or property destruction took place.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is integral to the 2020 election, with more electoral votes than its other competitive swing state counterparts. Both presidential candidates recognize the importance of the state and have spent significant time there in recent weeks. Militias including the Proud Boys, Boogaloo Bois, AmCon, CDF, LFM, Mountain Top Watch,[14] Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia,[15] Domestic Terrorism Response Organization,[16] and Carlisle Light Infantry Militia[17] have seized the opportunity to bolster their activity as well, especially as partisan protests have spiked. For example, earlier this month, the Proud Boys were present at a rally in Philadelphia organized by Refuse Fascism that was meant to educate people about the militia. The rally came in the aftermath of comments made by President Trump during the first presidential debate in which he told groups like the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by" (CBS News, 30 September 2020).

Militias in the state continue to form and recruit. In early August, the CDF (more information above) was formed in Pennsylvania with an agenda to train American civilians for potential combat. In late September, the Mountain Top Watch Militia held a recruitment event in Mountain Top, half an hour outside Scranton, home town of Presidential candidate Joe Biden.

Militias have countered demonstrations associated with the BLM movement on a number of occasions. For example, in July, in Manheim, an hour and a half west of Philadelphia, during a march in support of the BLM movement, the Pennsylvania LFM staged a counter-protest. In addition to showing up in opposition to protests associated with the BLM movement, the group supports the Back the Blue movement for

[14] The Mountain Top Watch is an unaffiliated local militia gathering in Pennsylvania.
[15] The Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia is an unaffiliated Pennsylvania militia organized by previous Pennsylvania Light Foot Militia lead Christian Yingling (Post-Gazette, 16 August 2017).
[16] The Domestic Terrorism Reponse Organization is a coalition of militias and militant conservative and right-wing organizations formed this summer to 'counter Antifa' in Pennsylvania.
[17] The Carlisle Light Infantry is an unaffiliated local militia group based out of Pennsylvania that is linked to the Domestic Terrorism Response Organization.

police and law enforcement. In July, for example, people staged a protest march at a rally in Philadelphia, which was attended by Vice President Mike Pence in support of the Back the Blue movement. A number of members of the Proud Boys harassed counter-demonstrators who were present in support of the BLM movement, and later attended the Back the Blue 'after-party,' together with police officers. In September, Proud Boys were again present in Philadelphia at another Back the Blue rally, months following the rally with Vice President Pence.

Tensions stemming from police conduct are not novel to Pennsylvania, and it has had a wave of protests calling for an end to police brutality. Last year, leaked reports of bigoted social media posts by police — thousands of racist, Islamophobic, and offensive posts on Facebook — were met with outrage (New York Times, 3 June 2019). Seventy-two Philadelphia police officers were pulled from the street and put on administrative duties while facing investigation (New York Times, 20 June 2019); many were fired. In 2020, "nearly all of those officers are appealing their discipline through the police union's arbitration process — even those who voluntarily left the department rather than face termination" (Billy Penn, 30 June 2020). Since the start of the summer, police have engaged in 5% of demonstrations in Pennsylvania, and 10% of demonstrations in Philadelphia. Of those, police used force over half of the time, both across the state as well as specifically in Philadelphia. On 1 June, for example, hundreds of demonstrators in support of the BLM movement were trapped in an embankment and tear gassed (Philadelphia Inquirer, 25 June 2020). The police response was excessive by their own admission, and one officer was fired and faces assault charges after videos emerged showing him pepper spraying demonstrators directly in the face while they were kneeling.

Meanwhile, militias have taken it upon themselves to take up arms to maintain law and order. In June, for example, while supporters of the BLM movement, including the Essex County Sheriff, staged a protest in Elizabethtown against police brutality, armed counterprotesters from the Domestic Terrorism Response Organization and the Carlisle Light Infantry were present, both on the streets as well as overlooking from rooftops. In July, the LFM patrolled a protest associated with the BLM movement in Mifflintown, central Pennsylvania, to 'prevent violence' between counter-demonstrators. They came again in September, near a protest associated with the BLM movement, to 'protect' the courthouse and to again 'prevent' or 'de-escalate' any violence. In July, armed members of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia 'watched over' a protest associated with the BLM movement, which was against the arrest of a local Black man who had been tasered by police the day prior, in Wyomissing, an hour northwest of Philadelphia. The militia members stated that they were there "to protect the borough if the protests became violent" (WITF, 27 July 2020). That same month, members of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia, the Boogaloo Bois, and the Proud Boys gathered in Gettysburg to 'protect' Civil War monuments and the flag after rumors of an "Antifa flag burning" spread on conservative information channels, despite the fact that no flag burners turned up.

Wisconsin

Wisconsin is a crucial swing state in the 2020 election, and was thrust into the spotlight in late August after reports that teenager Kyle Rittenhouse had killed two demonstrators and injured a third in Kenosha. Rittenhouse came to Kenosha in response to a 'call to action' on Facebook by the Kenosha Guard to 'protect lives and property' against demonstrators associated with the BLM movement, demonstrating in the aftermath of the police shooting of Jacob Blake. Despite murdering two people in public, Rittenhouse was not detained at the scene. Prior to the shooting that evening, videos depict police telling armed

members of the Kenosha Guard over a loudspeaker, "We appreciate you guys, we really do" in response to their vigilantism in 'standing guard' and 'keeping businesses safe', even sharing water with Rittenhouse at one point (Forbes, 26 August 2020). These behaviors have brought attention to the 'friendliness' of police towards militia groups in the state. In addition to the Kenosha Guard, the Proud Boys, the Boogaloo Bois, and the CDF have also been active, as have unnamed groups in Madison and Milwaukee.

Nearly 73% of demonstrations in the state since late May have been associated with the BLM movement. These demonstrations spiked after George Floyd's killing by police in neighboring Minnesota in late May, and then spiked again in the aftermath of the shooting of Jacob Blake by police in late August.

In Kenosha, the transition of armed groups into the role of vigilantes is evident. The night before the Rittenhouse event, a small unidentified armed group was present in Madison while a demonstration was being held against police brutality and the shooting of Blake. The group claimed they were there to 'prevent' violence and to 'ensure safety.' Since then, in October, an unidentified militia gathered in Milwaukee to 'protect homes' in anticipation of unrest following the decision by Milwaukee District Attorney not to file charges against Wauwatosa Police Officer Joseph Mensah who was involved in the fatal shooting of Alvin Cole. Cole, a 17-year-old Black teen, was shot and killed by a police officer earlier this year outside a mall in Wauwatosa. The officer was responding to a disturbance call. The police maintain that Cole, armed with a stolen gun, fired first during the incident and was shot by the officer after failing to drop his gun (Washington Post, 9 October 2020). A third-party investigative report prepared by former US Attorney Steven Biskupic revealed that Cole's gun had gone off accidentally, hitting Cole in the arm (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 7 October 2020). After that, his gun had become inoperable.

From the start of 2017 through June 2020, at least 246 law enforcement officers in the state have quit rather than be fired, with another 147 officers quitting prior to the completion of internal affairs investigations (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 9 September 2020). Since the start of the summer, involvement by state forces in demonstrations in Wisconsin has been limited, with engagement in only about 7% of demonstrations. Nevertheless, in cases where authorities have engaged, they have used force 75% of the time.

In addition to protests associated with the BLM movement, over 11% of demonstrations since May in Wisconsin have been fueled by reactions to coronavirus restrictions. While there have been a number of protests in support of restrictions or advocating for increased protections, there have been numerous protests in opposition to these measures. For example, last month protests were held in Eau Claire to advocate against a proposed ordinance that would increase the power of local officials to issue health orders and restrictions to prevent spread of the coronavirus. The month prior, numerous protests were held demanding the reopening of schools or opposing the governor's mask mandate. In October, Wisconsin was home to "the worst coronavirus outbreak in America" (Yahoo, 10 October 2020) and, with hospital infrastructure strained, a new field hospital was recently assembled in Madison to support with overflow (The Capital Times, 14 October 2020). It remains to be seen if opposition to restrictions will persist if cases continue to rise.

In addition to presence at demonstrations, militias like the CDF have engaged in recruitment and training events in the state, such as a recruitment event in late August and a pistol training event in September, both held in Oconto county, outside Green Bay.

Oregon

Oregon has been the site of significant unrest in recent months involving demonstrators met by armed militias as well as state and federal forces. Groups such as the Proud Boys, Patriot Prayer, III%ers, Boogaloo Bois, and the Sons of Liberty[18] have been active in the state since the start of the summer. Oregon provides a counterpoint to the type of activity seen in the other states explored thus far. Much of the Pacific Northwest in general, and Portland specifically, has been a long-term battleground for struggles between armed and unarmed, right- and left-wing contingents. This history has led to some of the country's most organized and prepared networks of mobilization. The existence of these networks is likely a major push factor towards the potential for violence, just as anti-mask protests have been a catalyzing force in other regions.

Approximately 71% of demonstrations since the start of the summer in Oregon have been associated with the BLM movement. A number of these have been met with engagement by armed groups. For example, on 10 July, in Springfield (outside Eugene), protesters in support of the BLM movement were met with armed counter-protesters. In August, in Eugene, a number of demonstrators marched in a protest organized by the United Communists and Anarchists of Eugene in support of the BLM movement and in solidarity with an underaged girl who had been violently arrested by police weeks prior. They were met with armed counter-protesters, some of whom made Nazi salute. One protester was assaulted by one of the counter-demonstrators, which was caught on a livestream.

In addition to the demonstrations associated with the BLM movement, demonstrations supporting President Trump have been on the rise since August. A number of these events have involved armed militias. Most attention has been on the caravan demonstration in support of President Trump on 29 August, in which rally-goers included members of Patriot Prayer, III%ers, and Proud Boys. They used pepper spray and shot paintball guns at counter-demonstrators rallying in support of the BLM movement. Videos showed that they also intentionally drove their trucks through the crowd of counter-demonstrators who attempted to block the streets. Amidst the clashes, a member of Patriot Prayer, Aaron 'Jay' Danielson, was shot and killed. The following week, in Salem, pro-Trump supporters armed with rifles, batons, and tear gas, rallied around the state capitol; opposing groups, including BLM supporters, were also present and clashed with at least two pro-Trump supporters who were identified as being affiliated with the Proud Boys.

Law enforcement has engaged in nearly a quarter — over 21% — of all demonstrations in Oregon, and nearly half of all demonstrations in Portland, with local police supported by federal agents. Within these demonstrations, authorities have used force over half the time, with the rate of force rising in the aftermath of the deployment of federal agents (ACLED, 3 September 2020). Oregon police are stretched quite thin in response: in June, Jami Resch announced that she was stepping down as chief of the Police Bureau in Portland (USA Today, 9 September 2020). In August, "the Portland Police Bureau ... lost 49 officers to retirement … more than during all of 2019" (Washington Post, 18 September 2020). That

[18] The Sons of Liberty are a smaller brand of nationwide militia groups that come out of a re-forming of a popular militia brand of the mid-1990s.

month, a group of more than 100 far-right activists, including Proud Boys and armed militia members, staged a Back the Blue rally in support of law enforcement and President Trump in front of the Justice Center in Portland. People carrying shields with references to the QAnon conspiracy theory were also present. Right-wing demonstrators were armed with paintball guns, metal rods, aluminum bats, fireworks, pepper spray, rifles, and handguns. More than 200 Antifa and BLM supporters held a counter-demonstration, some of them had fireworks and bottles filled with chemical solutions. The two groups engaged in tense, face-to-face confrontations, pushing, punching, kicking, and throwing objects at one another. Some pro-police demonstrators fired paintball guns and deployed pepper spray against counter-demonstrators, and one was filmed pointing a gun. A member of the Proud Boys assaulted a journalist, breaking his finger with a baton. Police were present at the scene, yet did not intervene to stop the fighting, indicating in a statement released later that those involved had 'willingly' engaged, and that police forces were stretched too thin. In light of this limited capacity, militia violence will likely continue and potentially escalate.

States at moderate risk

North Carolina

North Carolina is a swing state in both the presidential election as well as the Senate race for incumbent Republican Thom Tillis' seat. "Most paths to the White House go through North Carolina … [and this is] particularly true for President Trump" (CNBC, 20 October 2020). As such, both candidates have been spending considerable time campaigning in the state.

The state also has a history of neo-Confederate and paramilitary organization, especially around Confederate monuments — seen both this summer and last year as well. Late last month, for example, a man was arrested for having a gun at a demonstration held at a Confederate monument. Proud Boys have been active in the state since the start of the summer, engaging in protests around child sex trafficking, which have spiked in connection with the QAnon movement. In other cases, those armed at protests have not necessarily been linked to a named militia: in late June, for example, a group of white men showed up with guns to observe a protest associated with the BLM movement in Danbury.

In addition to militia presence, there have also been a number of demonstrations in support of President Trump over the last month, including caravans and boat parades. Some of these have been linked to pro-police movements. In late August, for example, pro-police counter-demonstrators, in opposition to a march associated with the BLM movement held in Waynesville, waved US and Confederate flags alongside Trump 2020 banners. Within this increasingly polarized context, there have also been reports of violent threats, as in mid-July in Raleigh when two men wearing "Make America Great Again" hats pulled a gun on a Black woman and her daughter after racially harassing them.

Cities with medium-sized populations, as well as suburban areas, serve as natural points of coalescence for militia activity. North Carolina is home to a number of such cities — including Greensboro and Chapel Hill — which have historically and contemporarily acted as rallying points for violence.

Texas

Texas is a swing state in the presidential election, with Democrats hoping to flip the state for the first time since 1976 (CNN, 12 July 2020). The Senate race as well, in which Democratic challenger MJ Hegar vies for incumbent Republican John Cornyn's seat, is also a competitive race — despite the fact that the race has not made quite the national headlines that Beto O'Rourke's challenge of Senator Ted Cruz's seat did back in 2016 (Vox, 20 October 2020). O'Rourke's campaign ushered in a blue wave of support for Democratic candidates in the state, which has in turn fostered a right-wing reaction (Independent, 31 October 2018). O'Rourke's calls for gun reform, both in his Senate campaign and in his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president which began late last year, further ignited armed right-wing organizing and activism (NPR, 12 September 2019).

Texas is home to multiple high-gravity locations as well as major local and regional organizing that has involved armed militant groups, such as in Belton this summer. In mid-June, hundreds of protesters took to the streets in Belton in support of the BLM movement and were met by members of Open Carry Texas and unidentified local militia groups. While members of Open Carry Texas and the unidentified local militia groups ended up joining the BLM protesters after discussions between the two sides, things did not end so hopefully later that month. On 29 June, an armed gathering — including members of Open Carry Texas, unidentified communal militias, and the Boogaloo Bois — showed up to 'provide security' and to 'protect private property' at the daytime rally held in support of the BLM movement. The state capital, Austin, has attracted activity as well. In early August, armed members of the Proud Boys and III% Security Force were present during a demonstration associated with the BLM movement. The week prior, BLM supporters marching in Austin were met with a car that drove into the crowd. One of the demonstrators allegedly aimed a gun at the driver (though this claim has been disputed), resulting in the driver shooting a demonstrator, who succumbed to his injuries. The shooter is an Army sergeant who reportedly "fantasized about killing BLM protesters" (International Business Times, 31 July 2020).

Virginia

Virginia made headlines back in 2017 when Charlottesville was the site of the 'Unite the Right' rally that left an anti-fascist protester dead and many others injured (USA Today, 1 July 2019). Many of those involved in the violence had traveled from out of state, demonstrating the willingness for many to come to Virginia in order to engage in potentially violent activism (MilitiaWatch, 14 August 2017). While Charlottesville is not particularly likely to be a location for violence at this moment, other locations in the state face higher risks, especially as Virginia has been a major target for intra-state and inter-state right-wing organizing. This year began with a nationwide gathering in Richmond, organized by a Second Amendment organization. This event brought substantial militia and far-right organizations to the city. Earlier this month, members of the Michigan Wolverine Watchmen, arrested for conspiracy to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, were found to have also considered targeting Virginia Governor Ralph Northam.

Virginia has continued to be a major target throughout the summer, with at least nine militias active in recent months, including the Boogaloo Bois, the Virginia Militia,[19] and the Virginia Knights.[20] One of the

[19] The Virginia Militia is a Virginia-based militia group that has taken on more of a Boogaloo approach since the start of the year.
[20] The Virginia Knights are also led by the same person as leads the Virginia Militia. The group is also Virginia-based and has been highly involved in summer protests in Richmond and elsewhere.

most influential 'Boogaloo' influencers of the US is also the commander of the Virginia Militia and the Virginia Knights, and has attempted to align his group and politics with BLM 757 — an independent, Hampton Roads-area group that has clashed with other BLM leaders and progressive organizers, and that is split between traditional and armed protest in Richmond. In late July, for example, several hundred people staged a march in Richmond in solidarity with demonstrators in Portland, Oregon and against the deployment of federal agents. A city dump truck was set on fire, while rocks, batteries, and other items were thrown at police officers. Members of BLM 757 participated in the event and were joined by Boogaloo Bois and representatives of the Virginia Militia and Virginia Knights. There was some opposition to the inclusion of Boogaloo Bois among the crowd. Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney claimed that white supremacists had 'spearheaded' the violence. According to the police chief, some individuals that have been with the Boogaloo Bois and others involved in or influenced by the Antifa movement had been identified by police at the demonstration. Police used pepper spray to disperse the crowds, and nearly two dozen people were arrested. Earlier this month, a cohort of about 50 members of armed groups — including the Virginia Militia, Virginia Knights, Boogaloo Bois, and BLM 757 — gathered to protest in Newport News after a Boogaloo-affiliated Virginia militia leader, Mike Dunn, was arrested by police the week prior for open-carrying a pistol to an event. They showed up to protest against a local ordinance that bans open carry in public. Dunn, whose gun was previously confiscated, was given chocolate milk and a PA system by the police chief, further underscoring friendly ties between law enforcement and militias.

California

California, the home state of Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Kamala Harris, is the most populous state in the nation. This large and diverse population is spread across multiple centers throughout the state; these centers are spatially discrete, creating areas of gravity for the rural and exurban areas that surround them. For example, Oakdale, a town that has been a flashpoint for militia organizing this summer, is highly representative of a locale that is conducive to right-wing militia gathering, particularly when it comes to fears of 'Antifa' activism. In early June, a member of the III%ers attacked a BLM supporter during a demonstration. Three days later, the California State Militia's 2nd Infantry Regiment, along with a dozen conservative groups of people, gathered to oppose a planned protest in support of the BLM movement. The demonstrators showed up and stood on the sidewalk for about an hour and then left after the police chief requested that they leave, particularly when the BLM demonstration never materialized. Another three days later, unidentified militia members hired by a local property owner showed up ahead of rumors of yet another BLM protest that never occurred.

There are a number of militias present across the state, including the Boogaloo Bois, who are especially active in the Bay Area. In late May, during a demonstration associated with the BLM movement in Oakland, two alleged members of the Boogaloo Bois fired from a vehicle onto federal officers who were working security at the protest, killing one and injuring a second. One of the assailants was reported to be an Air Force Sergeant. The following week, in Santa Cruz, an armed clash ensued between police and a Boogaloo Bois member in which a police officer was shot dead. In addition to armed clashes with law enforcement, Boogaloo Bois have also often tried to incorporate themselves into demonstrations associated with the BLM movement. In early June, California Highway Patrol detained a person affiliated with the Boogaloo Bois after he was found with at least one gun bag while expressing opposition to the ongoing BLM demonstration in Sacramento.

Other militia activity is more dispersed throughout the state. For example, in late June, a man, allegedly linked to the KKK, drove into a group of African-American people at a parking lot in Torrance, near Los Angeles, speeding towards them after verbally attacking them. In mid-August, Proud Boys and III%-affiliated groups showed up to a 'Latinos for Trump' rally in the Sunland-Tujunga neighborhood of Los Angeles. A counter-demonstration also took place drawing about 100 people, including a number of people associated with Antifa, as well as BLM supporters. The demonstrations turned violent when a far-right supporter pepper sprayed a Black community organizer, while one of the demonstrators associated with the BLM demonstration tackled the far-right supporter, who was later hit over the head with a skateboard and hospitalized. A large group of far-right supporters approached the BLM group, threatening further physical violence. BLM supporters were reportedly outnumbered at least two-to-one. A brawl broke out, which was dispersed after police deployed smoke bombs, resulting in at least four people needing medical assistance.

In addition to engagement during demonstrations, training events have also been reported across the state, especially those involving the California State Militia, as well as the American Contingency who has held pistol training.

New Mexico

Unlike the other states explored here, New Mexico has been home for years to 'border militias,' including far-right, racist groups. The groups provide an outlet not only for local armed individuals, but also for armed activists to travel across state lines to respond to fears of 'immigrant caravans.' For this reason, New Mexico has drawn from the nearby states of Texas and Arizona repeatedly, and other militia groups, such as those from Colorado, have previously traveled to New Mexico to get involved (MilitiaWatch, 12 March 2019).

Albuquerque, which has seen numerous protests associated with the BLM movement, was the site of the June shooting of a protester by a right-wing activist affiliated with the New Mexico Civil Guard,[21] who was responding to a 'muster call' to defend a statue (MilitiaWatch, 17 June 2020). In July, hundreds of people, including members of the New Mexico Civil Guard, religious leaders, and police supporters, gathered in a 'Protest for Freedom' in Albuquerque, at the Civic Place, against the government's mask mandate, as well as the closure of non-essential businesses and schools in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, among other issues. In September, a group of people staged a 'Black New Mexico Movement' rally in Rio Rancho, outside Albuquerque, in support of the BLM movement, registering people to vote, and completing the census. Counter-demonstrators — including III%ers, a New Mexico Civil Guard member, and Cowboys for Trump — armed with guns, tactical gear, a baton, and a baseball bat, staged a Blue Lives Matter rally in support of law enforcement and President Trump. Police kept the groups separate and reported verbal confrontations between the groups. In addition to engagement in demonstrations, the New Mexico Civil Guard also engages in training events, such as one held east of Moriarty, near Albuquerque. Other groups, including the Boogaloo Bois and III%ers, have also been active in the state in recent months.

[21] The New Mexico Civil Guard is a New Mexico based militia group that has drawn from Civil War re-enactors, Constitutionalists, Boogaloo, and even esoteric neo-Nazi activists in its group formation. It has focused on calling 'musters' in major New Mexico cities and was at the periphery of the shooting of an anti-statue protester in June.

Conclusion

While none of this assessment should be read as indicating a deterministic relationship or ensured outcome, we intend for this report to underscore the extremely high-risk threat environment that the run up, election period, and immediate aftermath represent. While it is not certain that one of the identified groups or spaces will experience violence during this contentious period, the likelihood has risen Based on expertise and ACLED data gathered over the summer and into the fall, the actors analyzed in this report are among the most prominent and assertive groups in this space, and the locations identified are among the most likely sites of increased militia activity.

For those watching and tracking armed militia movements and their environments, these trends raise significant concerns for the security of the election period, how seriously the election results will be taken, and the response to whichever winner is selected. It is yet unclear how many of these groups will react, no matter the vote's outcome. Does a Trump loss lead to anger at the system and a backlash against what is deemed a stolen election? Does a Trump victory further empower groups that see him as a supporter, including through verbal encouragement ahead of the election? The answers to these questions are as numerous as they are uncomfortable.