Dangerous or differences in opinion? Distinguishing between different types of extremism

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ABSTRACT:

Objective: This study considers the different forms extremism takes in the United States and how those forms relate to support for political violence and illegal tactics.

Methods: I rely on a latent profile analysis with data from the 2016 ANES to evaluate different types of extremism. I then predict support for political violence and related tactics with the forms of extremism suggested by the latent profile analysis.

Results: Different combinations of extremism exist, including versions that combine extremist and nonextremist views and those with multiple forms of extremism simultaneously – a group I label *compound extremists*. This latter group are the most likely to endorse political violence and illegal behavior as a means to political ends.

Conclusion: Attempts to address extremism need not completely change every extremist belief; instead, introducing some more moderate attitudes can weaken the connection between extremism and support for political violence.

Extremism is a particularly challenging problem for democratic societies. Many see extremism as a threat to stability, liberty, and democratic institutions (Gusfield 1962; Backes 2009); the potential of extremism to encourage violence further adds to these dangers (e.g., Midlarsky 2011; Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos 2013). Democracies often juggle their commitment to tolerance with the need to combat extremist perspectives. There are few easy solutions, and expanding democracy can cultivate, rather than eliminate, extremism (Hochman 2002).

Guarding against extremism, though, requires citizens and public officials to know the forms extremism can take and which are linked to violent and problematic tactics. The multifaceted nature of extremism makes this task challenging, as extremists can be attached to the left, right, and center of the ideological spectrum and based in various ideas, dispositions, or behaviors. In contemporary politics, then, what forms does extremism take? How do different combinations of extremism correspond to the proclivity to violence that make extremism a challenge to democratic society? Answering these questions helps determine when extremism is simply a matter of differences of opinion and when it becomes something far more dangerous.

I take on these questions directly, first synthesizing existing research into three different conceptualizations of extremism – norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism. I then consider how these kinds of extremism group together in the United States, relying on latent profile analysis with data from the 2016 American National Election Study. I find evidence of different combinations of norm, intensity, and disposition-based extremism and relate these groupings to support for political violence. Those who subscribe to multiple forms of extremism simultaneously – or compound extremists – most consistently support the use of violence. Individuals with more cross-pressured forms of extremism, on the other hand, lack such views. I end with a discussion of these findings and the study of extremism more broadly.

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What is extremism?

What attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors count as extremism? For candidates and politicians, the term extremism can often be used as a political tool or as an insult. Academics are similarly divided and recognize the label of extremist as a "contested term" (Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos 2013, 408). A significant body of research discusses extremism, but studies of extremism generally employ idiosyncratic conceptualizations of extremism. Some, for example, use the terms radicalism and extremism interchangeably (such as Thomas, McGarty, and Louis 2014), and others distinguish extremism from radicalism based on the former's connection to violent means (e.g., Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos 2013).

I summarize this body of research into three, nonexclusive types of extremism at the individual level: norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism. Each of these perspectives begins from a minimalist definition that extremism involves fringe beliefs of some kind. These three types then differ in what defines the fringes.

Norm-based extremism

One form of extremism emphasizes deviations from a social norm, or attitudes that go against some social standard (Klein and Kruglanski 2013; Kruglanski et al. 2014). In the language of research on social norms, norm-based extremists are those who hold beliefs that people ought not to hold, or those who violate injunctive social norms (Higgins 1987; Schultz et al. 2007). This kind of extremism is the most intertwined with judgments about what people should and should not believe and is the most tied to context, as injunctive standards change with time and place.

Researchers studying norm-based extremism focus on specific sets of beliefs. Extensive bodies of research explore these different types of norm-violations; consider, for example, the large literatures on racial prejudice (e.g., Feldman and Huddy 2005; Cramer 2020) or sexism (see

Glick and Fiske 2001; Bracic, Israel-Trummel, and Shortle 2019). Typically, studies under this umbrella consider one type of extremism in isolation. This means that studies of norm-based extremism produce a detailed understanding of specific norm-violating beliefs without broader knowledge about how these attitudes relate to other fringe views.

Intensity extremism

Others conceptualize extremism in terms of intensity (Klein and Kruglanski 2013). In this view, individuals with especially intense views are extremists, regardless of the substance of their views. Extremists are unusually committed, passionate, or vocal about their beliefs. Intensity extremism would therefore include definitions focusing on the spatial position of one's attitudes (on a 7-point scale, for example) or the emotional charge of one's views. Accordingly, an intensity-focused approach to extremism has sometimes been preferred by empirical researchers to avoid the normative judgments involved in other approaches to extremism.

Spatial position and emotional charge are notable examples of intensity extremism due to the availability of quantitative measures and their frequent use in empirical studies. Spatial position refers to where one's attitudes fall spatially on a range of possible views, with extremists being those on the ends of these scales. This is, by far, the most common definition of extremism in empirical social science studies (e.g., Fernbach et al. 2013; Fleming 2014; Boleslavsky and Cotton 2015). Emotional charge, on the other hand, refers to how much an attitude arouses strong emotional reactions. Several perspectives on extremism highlight the capacity of strong emotional feelings to encourage extremist and anti-democratic behavior (George and Wilcox 1996; Hardin 2002). Rather than emphasizing specific emotional states, this view describes extremists as people with high levels of affective arousal.

Dispositional extremism

A final version of extremism emphasizes global orientations or dispositions rather than specific attitudes (Lipset 1960; Greenberg and Jonas 2003). In this view extremism is something deeper than intensity about a particular topic or violating a specific norm. Instead, it is a stable, enduring way of interacting with the world.

This kind of extremism has a long history in the social sciences. Extensive research traditions explore specific dispositions sometimes labelled as extreme; for example, many have explored the authoritarian disposition, or the preferences of some for ordered, certain, and secure societies with conventional, established institutions (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1996; Feldman 2003; Conway et al. 2018). Others focus on dogmatism, or the tendency to hold an unjustifiable, unchanging certainty about one's beliefs (see Rokeach 1954; van Prooijen and Krouwel 2017; Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins 2019). Other extremist dispositions might include social dominance orientation (Pratto et al. 1994; Ekehammar et al. 2004) and populism (Aslanidis 2016; Donovan and Redlawsk 2018). In general, research on this kind of extremism focuses on dispositions that have a preference for rigidly structured societies and a black and white perspective on the world (Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson 2010).

Connections

Norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism are not mutually exclusive. One could be extremist across all three types, two, one, or none. However, existing studies focus only on a single kind of extremism; in the public, then, how much do these types of extremism co-occur? Do all those with extremist dispositions also hold objectionable beliefs? Are intensity extremists also dispositional extremists? Previous work on extremism does not provide predictions into how types of extremism relate to one another. As such, I descriptively document how norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism combine in the public, as summarized in RQ1.

RQ1: How do norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism combine in the public?

Consequences of extremism

Discussions of extremism presuppose that it has negative consequences. Scholar and activists, though, have noted that not everything labelled as extremist is socially or democratically undesirable. What types of extremism, then, pose challenges to democratic society?

Many propose that the most problematic consequence of extremism is its proclivity towards violence and illegal tactics. One way to distinguish extremism from radicalism is that radicals operate within established legal and moral rules and extremists resort to illegal and violent behavior (Midlarsky 2011; Bötticher 2017). From this point of view, extremists pose a problem to democratic society because they are willing to sacrifice human lives, safety, and the rule of law in service of their beliefs and to quash their opponents (Midlarsky 2011). The kinds of extremism discussed in the preceding section, then, become problematic when they involve violent and illegal tactics (Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos 2013).

To evaluate the link between different forms of extremism, violence, and illegal methods, I draw on theories in psychology about how people choose means to pursue their goals. People are faced with various methods of working towards their objectives and have multiple, competing goals at any given time. The specific means someone selects to accomplish their goals, then, is linked to their commitment to a specific goal and how much they prioritize that aim over other, competing objectives (Kruglanski et al. 2002; Klein and Kruglanski 2013).

Violence and illegal behavior represent one possible route to accomplishing political goals. However, they also conflict with other objectives people have (for example, not to inflict harm to others). As a result, to endorse violence, people need strong reasons to ignore competing objectives that discourage violent and illegal means.

Each kind of extremism discussed previously can make violent and illegal tactics more palatable, as summarized in H1. Intensity extremism indicates strong commitment to one's ideological and political views, and high levels of commitment allow individuals to justify the use of more extreme methods (Klein and Kruglanski 2013). Norm-based extremism represents another indicator of goal commitment, suggesting that individuals are willing to incur social costs to express beliefs that contradict the standards of others (Ibid.). Dispositional extremism, on the other hand, generally involves a black-and-white view of the world and a disregard for alternative viewpoints or perspectives. This should make radical behaviors more acceptable, as alternative ways of thinking represent something dangerous rather than differences of opinion.

H1: Higher levels of norm, intensity, and dispositional extremism should correlate with more support for violence and illegal behaviors.

While any of these three alone might encourage violent and illegal tactics, all three combined strongly suppress alternative goals that would otherwise discourage violence and criminal behavior. When someone is a norm-based, intensity, *and* dispositional extremist, most of their attitudes provide rationales for the use of more extreme, violent tactics. When individuals possess some kinds of extremism but not others, their moderate perspectives counterbalance their extreme views. This prompts other alternative goals and dilutes the attractiveness of violent and illegal methods. These predictions are summarized in H2:

H2: Those with higher levels of extremism across all types should more strongly support for violence and illegal behaviors than those with a mix of extreme and moderate beliefs.

Data

I evaluate this research question and hypothesis with survey data in the United States. Debates about the dangers of extremism can be found throughout American history, such as in

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discussions about Shay's Rebellion, the Alien and Sedition Acts, crackdowns on the Black Panthers, alt-right protests in Charlottesville, and recent violence by white nationalists. Questions about extremism therefore have perennial importance in the American context. Pragmatically, RQ1, H1, and H2 require measures of extremism and its consequences, and survey data from the United States provide access to detailed measures of both.

The survey data I draw from are the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES, N=4,271). The ANES is a nationally representative survey conducted around the 2016 election in the United States and contains items tapping into different types and consequences of extremism. With these data, I construct measures of norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism. All were standardized (mean of 0, standard deviation of 1) to make them more comparable.

Creating a measure of norm-based extremism is most challenging, as few universal injunctive norms exist; indeed, most are contested (Schultz et al. 2007; Hutchings, Walton, and Benjamin 2010). Those that do, such as prohibitions against child abuse, are unlikely to garner much explicit support in national surveys. In recognition of these issues, I take a different approach in measuring norm-based extremism. The 2016 ANES asks about attitudes that violate injunctive norms held by various subgroups in American society. More specifically, it includes items about racial resentment, support for feminism, sexism, opposition to egalitarianism, support for traditional moral values, anti-Christian attitudes, and unpatriotic beliefs (question text can be found in the Online Appendix). While far from all inclusive, these seven areas represent violations of injunctive norms that appeal to various parts of American society. Further, each has been politicized in recent years, as political actors attempt to mobilize support or discourage opposition by referring to these different norms (e.g., Banks and Hicks 2019; Valentino, Wayne,

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and Oceno 2018). As a whole, these seven measures represent a set of politically important, ideologically diverse views that violate standards held by different groups of Americans.

All seven measures were averaged into an index that indicates how much individuals hold beliefs that violate some injunctive norm. This measure is therefore not an indicator of how much a respondent violates universal values; instead, it captures the degree to which someone holds attitudes some set of the public thinks people should reject.

Further, this measure of norm-based extremism captures more detail than alternative operationalizations. Those violating multiple social norms across American society appear as more extreme than those violating only one such standard; this measure also makes violations of different injunctive norms comparable to one another. For example, someone with racially resentful attitudes would receive the same score as someone who is hostile towards Christians. Those with racially resentful, sexist, and anti-Christian attitudes, similarly, are coded as higher on norm-based extremism than those who hold only one or two of these beliefs. Empirical comparisons of the averaged vs. specific types of content extremism shows that the averaged version has a more consistent relationship to antidemocratic attitudes than any subtype.

The previous section also discussed intensity extremism, emphasizing spatial extremity and emotional charge. To measure spatial extremism, I used a set of twenty-four different items with an ordinal or continuous scale that could be transformed into a measure of spatial distance from the center point. Any question used in the dispositional or norm-based extremism measures was omitted to avoid duplicating those measures. These questions covered a range of topics including political ideology, government regulation, and affirmative action. A full list of these items can be found in the Online Appendix. To create the measure of spatial extremism, I recoded each item so that higher values indicated more spatially extreme responses from the

scale's midpoint. I averaged all twenty-four questions to get a single indicator of the amount of spatial extremism for each subject in the dataset. An alternative measure based on the average response in the sample is highly correlated with the midpoint version (r =0.93, p≈0.000), and I use the midpoint version here as it better reflects the decision by the respondent to select a spatially extreme view.

To measure emotional charge, I relied on a set of questions asking subjects how much they felt various emotions about Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Barack Obama. The items asked about anger, hope, fear, pride, and disgust about Clinton and Trump and pride and anger about Obama. These items were averaged to give a measure of the average amount of emotion a respondent felt about these political figures. While political figures are not the only things that arouse strong emotions in politics, I use these items as one way to measure the intensity form of extremism and because the ANES lacks other questions about emotional reactions to politics.

The final type of extremism, dispositional extremism, was measured in two ways: authoritarianism and openness-to-experience. I use established measures of both (see Online Appendix). The authoritarianism questions ask subjects to pick which values they prefer to instill in their children. The items are added together into a scale, ranging from least to most authoritarian, with the average respondent showing moderate levels of authoritarianism (mean of 0.62, where 0 is the lowest and 1 the highest amount of authoritarianism). This measure of authoritarianism has been extensively used in political science and connected to a number of important political outcomes (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Wronski et al. 2018).

One other type of personality mentioned in classic discussions of extremism is dogmatism. Unfortunately, the ANES lacks established questions directly measuring this rigid, closed-minded personality. The 2016 survey does include, however, measures of openness-to-

experience. This element of the Big Five Personality captures a lack of rigidity and closed thinking. Those high in openness should therefore be strongly *nondogmatic*, displaying higher levels of "creativity, curiosity, imagination and nonconformity" (Mondak and Halperin 2008, 342). As such, I consider low openness to be another form of dispositional extremism, conceptually similar to dogmatism. This sample leans to the open side, with an average openness score of 0.67 (where 0 is the least and 1 the most open).

To measure the consequences of extremism, I rely on three questions: tolerance for breaking rules to achieve political goals, support for "roughing up" protestors, and support for violence in pursuit of political goals (see Online Appendix for question wording). Each references the behaviors connected with the worst forms of extremism, moving from rule breaking to violence. Each item was measured on a five-point scale; all three questions were rescaled to run from 0 to 1 such that higher values indicate the more detrimental outcome (e.g., more support for violence). Respondents reported the most support for rule breaking (average of 0.466, standard error of 0.005), moderate approval of roughing up disruptive protestors (average of 0.348, s.e. of 0.005), and low levels of support for explicitly political violence (average of 0.07, s.e. of 0.003). I use these three items as separate indicators as they are empirically and conceptually distinct (Cronbach's alpha is low - 0.35 as are single-dimension factor loadings).

Methods

Addressing RQ1, H1, and H2 requires two types of analyses – a exploratory discussion of the combinations of extremism and an examination of the link between violence and extremism. For the exploratory portion, I use the measures of extremism from the previous section in a latent profile analysis (LPA), a form of latent class analysis, to document the combinations of norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism. LPA differs from factor analysis in that it

measures membership in different groups of an unobserved categorical variable whereas factor analysis explores continuous latent variables. In other words, the goal of LPA is to determine *groupings of respondents* rather than *loadings of items* (Magidson and Vermunt 2004; Oberski 2016). Unlike with conceptually similar forms of cluster analysis, LPA provides goodness-of-fit measures that researchers can use to evaluate different analytic specifications.

For several reasons, LPA is the ideal method for my research objectives. LPA allows researchers to look at combinations of variables prior to considering any dependent variables. In this sense, it is explicitly exploratory but permits subsequent hypothesis tests without extensive data fishing. Additionally, it can consider the combinations of these types of extremism based solely on individuals' responses, rather than arbitrary decisions about how kinds of extremism should combine. Most importantly, LPA directly estimates combinations of norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism in the American public, providing a clear answer to RQ1.

After the LPA, I use regression to connect these groupings of extremists to the outcomes discussed previously (violence and rule breaking). In these models, I also employ a set of control variables: age, education, income, gender, race, political interest, political knowledge, religious service attendance, seven-point party identification, and geographic region. This helps account for demographic and political confounders that relate both to the LPA groupings and the outcomes of interest. These models take the following form:

$$Y_i = \propto + X\beta + C\beta_c + \varepsilon$$

Y_i represents the *ith* dependent variable, $X\beta$ the forms of extremism and their associated coefficients, $C\beta_c$ the control variables and their coefficients, and ε the error term. I estimate these models using OLS regression; for H1, the forms of extremism in the models are norm, intensity, and dispositional extremism. For H2, the forms of extremism are the combinations of

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extremism produced by the LPA. For both the regressions and the preliminary LPA, I use the weighting recommended by the ANES to improve the generalizability of the sample.

For RQ1, H1, and H2, these data are observational and do not support strong causal claims. However, the primary purpose of this analysis is to descriptively consider types of extremism and how democratically problematic outcomes correlate with those combinations. The data and method are well suited to make these forms of descriptive inference and make conclusions about the broader American population. Given the state of existing research on extremism, this kind of descriptive information has value on its own (Gerring 2012; Kreuzer 2019) and is required to make other, causal inferences (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 34).

Results

Like confirmatory factor analysis and cluster analysis, LPA requires researchers to specify the number of groups to consider. Based on the measures of norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism, I used the LPA to divide the respondents into two, three, four, five, and six groups. Before looking at the composition of these groups and selecting a preferred set of divisions, I examined measures of model fit between the models (specifically AIC and BIC; see Nylund, Asparouhov, and Muthén 2007). The two-group model did not fit the data as well as other versions; the three, four, five, and six group models had nearly identical measures of fit. I next considered the different groupings proposed by the three, four, five, and six group LPAs. The four-group model seemed to have the best interpretability without having substantively redundant groups or creating groups with an extremely small number of people.

Figure 1 describes the divisions created by this four-group LPA by displaying how each group differs from the sample average on the measures of norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism; the scale of the y-axis in this graph is standard deviations. Based on the

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composition of these groups from the extremism measures, I labelled these groups as nonextremists, polite extremists, levelheaded extremists, and compound extremists. I created these names to concisely describe the results of the LPA. There are also demographic differences between these groups; see the Online Appendix for figures showing those differences.

<FIG. 1 HERE>

Fig. 1 Groupings of extremism

Nonextremists are notable for their relative lack of extremism. In comparison to the overall sample, they display only small amounts of intensity and norm-based extremism, lower amounts of norm violations, the lowest level of authoritarianism, and high amounts of openness. Demographically, this group is the whitest, least likely to attend church, the most educated, and has the highest income. Politically speaking, these individuals lean toward Democrats and are politically knowledgeable. About thirty-two percent of Americans fell into this category in 2016.

Polite extremists seem defined by a combination of mild amounts of authoritarianism and lower amounts of norm violations. This group indicates the importance of using LPA rather than assuming all authoritarians hold a shared set of attitudes – these individuals hold authoritarian beliefs but do not differ from the rest of the sample in violating injunctive norms. Referring to the kinds of extremism from earlier sections, polite extremists are dispositional extremists but anti-extreme on norm-based extremism. They also lack extremism on the measures of intensity extremism. Considering political and social characteristics, polite extremists are more likely to be black than the other groupings, are younger, more religious, and have lower incomes. They are also the most Democratic. About eleven percent of Americans were classified into this group.

Like polite extremists, levelheaded extremists are extreme on some measures and moderate on others – they show the lowest amounts of intensity extremism. This type of extremist again demonstrates the importance of looking at combinations of extremisms, rather

than each type in isolation – while authoritarian and less open, these individuals would not be considered extreme along any other measure. Demographically, levelheaded extremists are less educated, have lower incomes, and less political knowledge than the overall sample. They tend to be political independents. Nine percent of Americans were put into this group by the LPA.

The final category, compound extremists, show moderate amounts of extremism across measures of dispositional, norm-based, and intensity extremism. This group displays more authoritarianism, increased norm violations, higher emotional intensity, and lower levels of openness than the sample average. The only measure on which they do not have higher amounts of extremism than the other groups is spatial extremism. Here, in contrast to both levelheaded extremists and polite extremists, compound extremists are simply average instead of anti-extreme. Unlike other kinds of extremists, compound extremists do not simultaneously hold extreme and anti-extreme views. While not the most extreme of the groups on any single measure, this category is extreme across *more versions* of extremism than any of the other three. Demographically, compound extremists are older, more religious, less educated, and have lower incomes. Politically, they are the most likely be Republican. The LPA suggests forty-six percent of Americans belonged to this group in 2016.

One of the differences that emerges from this discussion is that compound extremists are not pulled in different directions by any form of extremism. Instead, norm-based, dispositional, and intensity extremism measures all seem to push towards more extremism. Levelheaded and polite extremists, on the other hand, have some extreme and some moderate attitudes.

While these analyses address RQ1, they leave H1 and H2 untested. To address H1, I consider how the measures of norm, intensity, and dispositional extremism connect to the democratically problematic attitudes presented earlier. Each of these versions of extremism are

included separately for this stage of the analysis. As mentioned, I estimate these connections

using OLS regression and the survey weights provided by the ANES.

Figure 2 presents the results of these regressions. These analyses provide some support

for H1. Norm-based versions of extremism, for example, correlate with increased support for

rule breaking, violence against protestors, and political violence generally. For the other kinds of

extremism, however, the relationship is more mixed: authoritarianism and emotional extremism

are connected to increased levels of two of the three outcomes, and spatial extremism and a lack

of openness relate to more support for violence against protestors. These analyses suggest that

norm-based extremism has the strongest connection with support for violence, followed by

emotional extremism, authoritarianism, openness, and spatial extremism in that order.

<FIG. 2 HERE>

Fig. 2 Norm, intensity, and dispositional extremism coefficients

Turning now to H2, I explore how this picture changes when I use the four categories of

respondents from the LPA instead of the separate measures of extremism. Figure 3 presents the

results of the regressions connecting different groups of extremists with support for violence and

illegal tactics. The figures present the regression coefficients (comparing to the baseline of

nonextremists); more detailed regression results can be found in the Online Appendix. In these

analyses, I control for the demographic differences between the groupings; the distinctions

between classes discussed earlier indicate the importance of using these controls to rule out

spurious relationships based on such demographic differences. In these analyses, evaluating H2

involves comparing compound extremists to the other, more cross-pressured forms of extremism.

<FIG. 3 HERE>

Fig. 3 Connections to violence and rule-breaking

Not all forms of extremism have the same connection to democratically problematic views. Specifically, compound extremists hold higher levels of these attitudes – this type of extremist is more tolerant of breaking rules, more supportive of roughing up protestors, and more likely to feel that political violence is justified. Levelheaded and polite extremists, on the other hand, do not diverge from nonextremists in these attitudes. This pattern suggests consistent support for H2. The results in Figure 6 also provide a validation of the LPA analysis: the divisions generated by that analysis appear to distinguish between combinations of extremism that support the violence tactics that make extremism problematic for democratic society. Further, the strength of the correlation between compound extremists and support for violent and illegal tactics is much larger than for the separate forms of extremism; the coefficient for compound extremists is generally larger than a two standard deviation change in the separate forms of extremism shown in Figure 2. This provides additional support for H2.

Conclusion

Extremism can pose severe challenges to democratic society; the extensive study of extremism has largely been motivated by these concerns. However, conceptually and empirically, not all forms of extremism are the same. Addressing extremism requires a more complete understanding of what extremism is and when it threatens key elements of democracy.

The results of these analyses provide responses to these points. Some forms of extremism, like levelheaded extremists, are extreme in only one sense. Others, like compound extremists, display multiple forms of extremism at the same time. Importantly, it is these combined forms of extremism that correspond with the support for violence and rule breaking most antithetical to democracy. When extremists hold some extreme and some moderate beliefs, they do not endorse these methods. Comparing compound extremism to separate measures of

norm, intensity, and dispositional extremism also indicates a stronger connection between this combined form of extremism than any of the separate parts.

These conclusions are robust in several ways. The findings do not change with different modeling choices (e.g., ordinal models for more ordinal dependent variables or transformed versions of the dependent variables). The regression models also employ an extensive list of control variables, which help to isolate the importance of the groups of extremists, instead of underlying demographic differences between those categories (like gender or partisanship).

Future analyses should explore these patterns in other environments. This paper evaluates extremism in the American case, and more work is needed to compare these patterns to similar analyses in other countries. The goal of this paper has been to consider extremism in one context, but extremism is not a uniquely American problem. Extremism presents challenges to democracy across the world; the approach presented here should be applied beyond the United States to understand extremism in a more general way. The same could be said of consider other time periods beyond the specific political environment in the United States in 2016.

A number of important implications arise from these findings. Norm-based, intensity, and dispositional extremism do not drive violence and disrespect for the law nearly as much as compound extremism. In isolation, these kinds of extremism can be counteracted by other more moderate views. A more complex form of extremism across several dimensions is required to consistently produce support for the kinds of methods that undermine peaceful, democratic society. Emphasizing only one form (such as spatial extremity or authoritarianism, for example) will show only a limited part of the picture about the problems posed by extremism.

Additionally, these results raise important causal questions. What prompts individuals to adopt multiple forms of extremism at once, and what encourages people to take a more mixed

stance? Different environments and events may shape the form extremism takes in the public; considering the drivers of this change is critically important to those interested in reducing the consequences of extremism. While some potential candidates exist (such as normative threats, uncertainty, group-based competition, and economic insecurity), much more theorizing and study is needed to explain how these factors encourage compound extremism. In a related way, experimental research should also explore factors that defuse extremism and make compound extremism less likely – interventions like perspective-taking, uncertainty reduction, and cross-group discussions may discourage compound extremism.

From a more normative perspective, these results provide both optimism and pessimism. Optimistically, a cocktail of forms of extremism is required to encourage problematic political tactics. Introducing moderation on some dimension seems to undermine the anti-democratic tendencies of extremism. This is especially important given the stability of dispositional-based forms of extremism and the difficulties of political persuasion.

On the other hand, the most problematic form of extremism was also more prevalent than other, more moderate kinds of extremism in 2016. Compound extremism is not restricted to the fringes of American society, and its political consequences may therefore be wide-ranging. How to best discourage compound extremism is an open question that has important political consequences, both within and outside of the American context. Answering this question is critically important for those who both study and experience extremism across the world.

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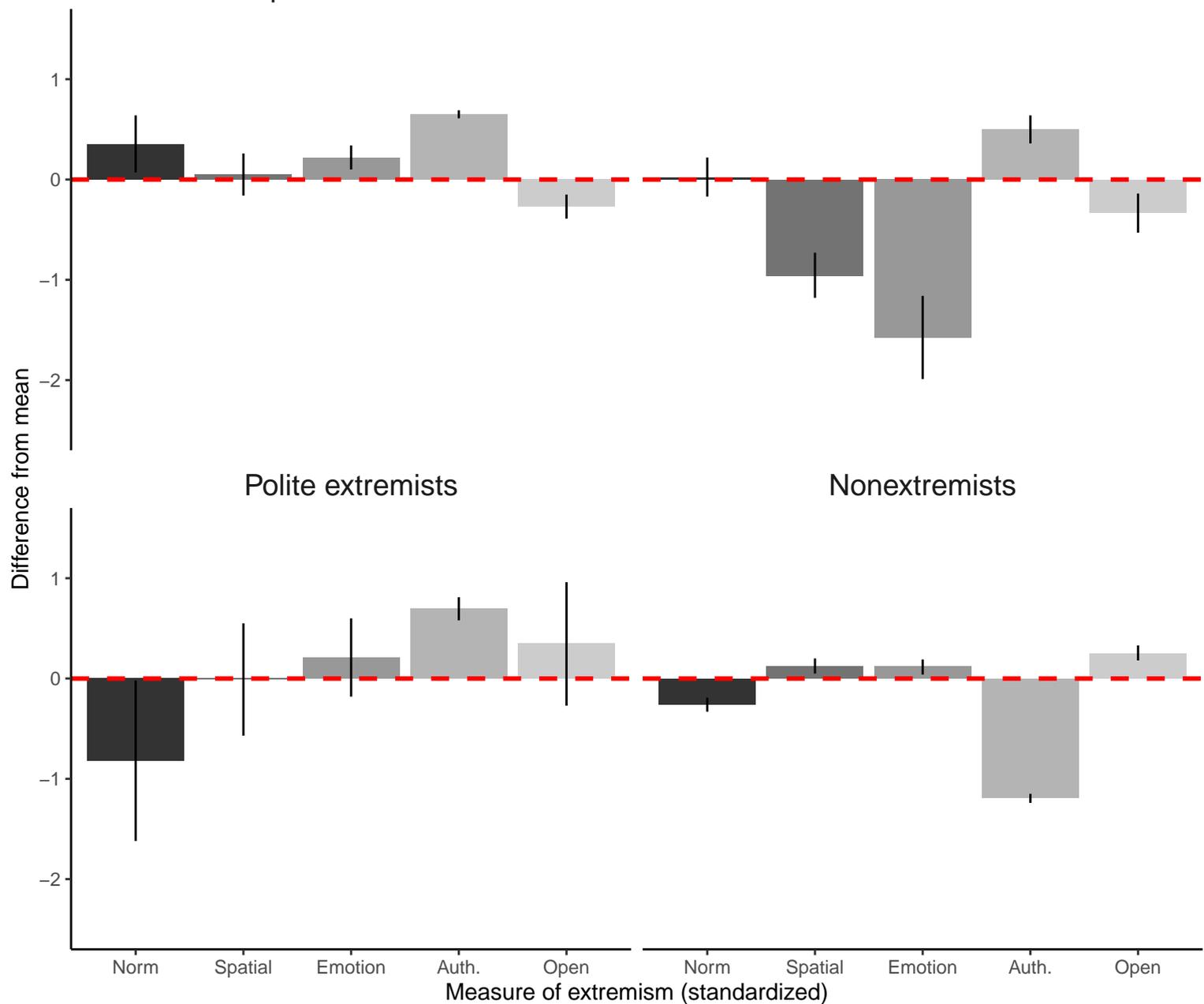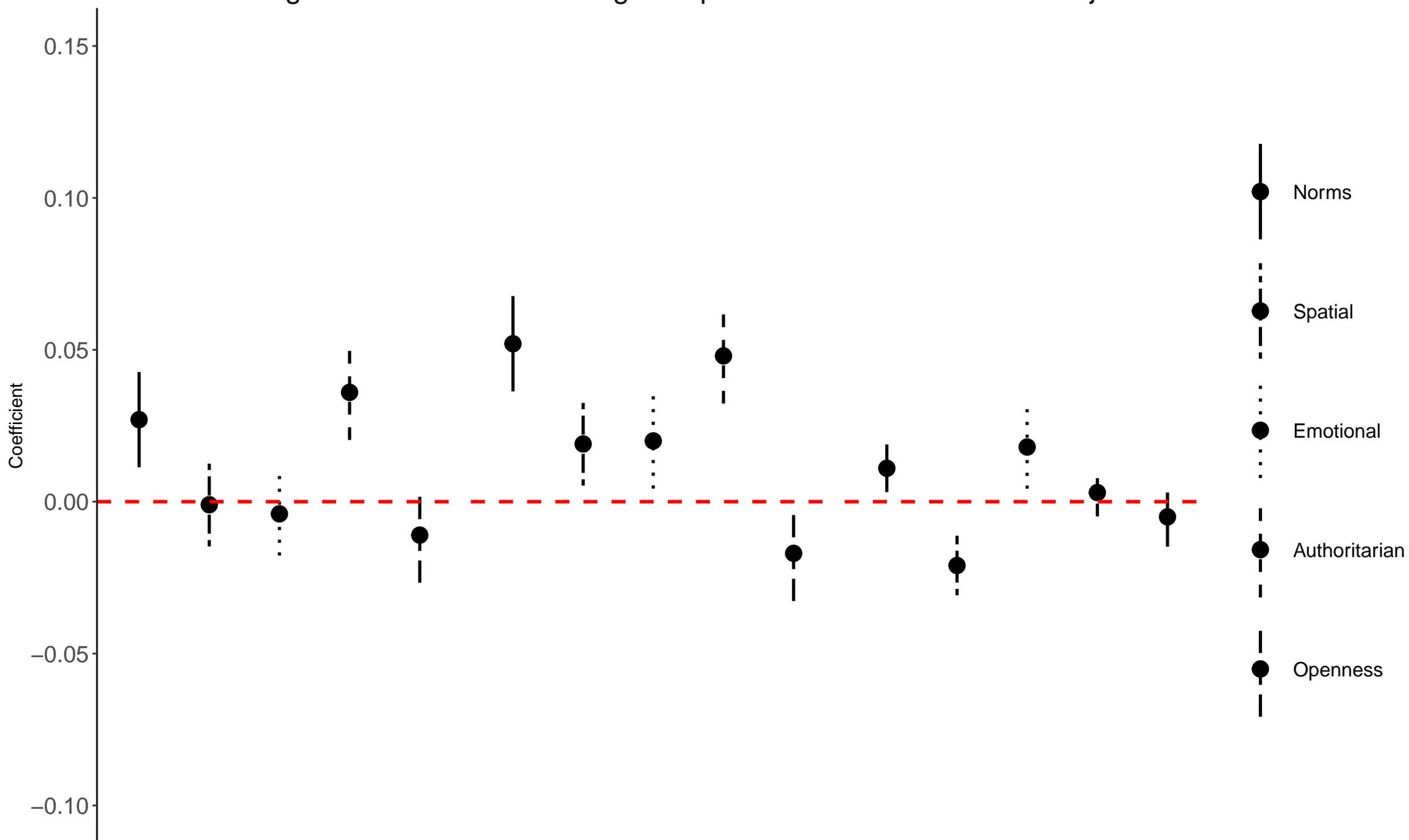
Bars represent distance from the mean on each type of extremism. Black lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals