

Alt-Right as a Social Movement
Ethnic Competition Theory and Internet Searches for Online Content

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the social determinants of Alt-Right activity and provides an empirical assessment of whether the Alt-Right is influenced by social processes similar to those explaining participation in traditional white supremacist organizations. Using Internet search data from all counties in the United States (U.S.) between 2017 and 2018, I examine the effect of various county-level variables on search volume for Alt-Right content. Results indicate that the determinants of Alt-Right activity systematically differ from what one would expect for conventional racist groups. I find that counties with larger percentages of college graduates, of highly educated non-white and immigrant groups, and higher poverty levels for college graduates tend to have a higher search volume for Alt-Right content. Overall, these findings suggest that, in marked contrast to traditional hate organizations—the Alt-Right’s constituency is comprised predominantly of affluent, college-educated individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

The Alt-Right is a predominantly online white supremacist movement operating primarily in the United States. Although the Alt-Right is a relatively recent phenomenon, the movement's ideological origins can be traced to a longstanding tradition of racist and anti-Semitic beliefs maintained by racist organizations in the U.S. Because of the parallels between the beliefs of the Alt-Right and organized hate groups, some scholars argue that the Alt-Right reflects just one of many rebranding strategies undertaken by the broader white supremacist movement to develop a more palatable version of racist extremism and appeal to a wider audience (Futrell and Simi 2017). Others, however, assert that the Alt-Right—despite sharing the same core tenets of white supremacy as traditional racist organizations—represents a departure from conventional white supremacist groups because of the movement's unorganized, anonymous, and online nature (Hawley 2017). Although the movement's constituency remains mostly anonymous, web traffic estimates suggest that the Alt-Right's ideological following is sizeable. Between September 2016 and February 2018, there were an average of more than 4.3 million total visits per month and more than 1 million unique visitors each month to several popular Alt-Right websites (Main 2018). Despite this popularity, relatively little academic research examines the Alt-Right as a social movement.

In this article, I analyze the social determinants of Alt-Right activity. By doing so, I also evaluate how the Alt-Right may differ from earlier forms of white supremacist mobilization. To do this, I draw on ethnic competition theory and examine how county-level demographic composition, economic conditions, and traditional racist mobilization influence Alt-Right activity. Earlier research has studied the Alt-Right primarily by

analyzing Alt-Right media (Stern 2019) or interviewing movement leadership (Hawley 2017; Main 2018). However, no systematic research has analyzed the ordinary followers who consume Alt-Right media. This study provides an indirect assessment of the Alt-Right's constituency by examining the social conditions influencing the consumption of Alt-Right content. This evaluation contributes to a well-established literature on far-right social movements in the United States (Boutcher, Jenkins and Van Dyke 2017; Cunningham and Phillips 2007; McVeigh et al. 2014). Additionally, this contributes to the growing body of work examining the Alt-Right (Hawley 2017; Main 2018; Stern 2019) by providing an empirical analysis of the social determinants of the movement.

To examine the determinants of Alt-Right activity, I use Internet search data collected via the Keyword Planner Tool within Google Ads, socioeconomic and demographic data from the American Community Survey, and data on racist organizations from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). My goal is to determine what shapes interest in Alt-Right media, and whether the Alt-Right appeals to the same constituency as traditional organized racist organizations. To investigate the Alt-Right's relationship to the conventional white supremacist movement, I develop several hypotheses from prior research on organized racism in the U.S. and recent scholarship on the Alt-Right. I test these hypotheses using negative binomial regression models. Results indicate that the social determinants of the Alt-Right differ from traditional racist organizations. Overall, these findings suggest that the Alt-Right's constituency is highly educated and diverges from membership of traditional white supremacist groups.

BACKGROUND

The Alt-Right is a far-right social movement¹ in the U.S. characterized by abandonment of mainstream conservative ideals and adherence to white supremacist ideology (Main 2018). The Alt-Right subscribes to what movement leadership calls “race realism,” which asserts that race is a fundamentally genetic and biological characteristic that accounts for intelligence and behavior differences across racial and ethnic groups (Main 2018). Maintaining the belief that whites are biologically superior to non-whites, the Alt-Right shares the same general ideology as white supremacist organizations in the United States. However, the Alt-Right has two primary factors that distinguish it from traditional racist organizations like the KKK, neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and Christian Identity groups. First, the Alt-Right is not formally organized. Unlike other far-right social movements that have formal leadership and rules for membership, the Alt-Right is decentralized and largely anonymous. Second, Alt-Right activity occurs predominantly online (Hawley 2017). Although organized groups have used the Internet for the dissemination of white supremacist content and recruitment of members (Adams and Roscigno 2005; Burris, Smith and Strahm 2000; Gerstenfeld, Grant and Chiang 2003), participation in the Alt-Right is almost exclusively limited to the production, consumption, and/or sharing of content on decentralized social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan (Hawley 2017).

Although the Alt-Right is not formally organized, the movement has goals.

Interviews with prominent Alt-Right figures indicate that the movement’s primary

¹ I rely on McCarthy and Zald’s (1977) definition of social movement, which is: “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.”

objective is to develop a broader constituency through mainstream diffusion and adoption of Alt-Right ideas (Hawley 2017; Main 2018). This goal follows in part from the Alt-Right's focus on "metapolitics"—as opposed to more traditional political activism. The term "metapolitics" was coined by the European New Right, a far-right social movement from which the Alt-Right draws inspiration, and refers to the pre-political process of changing conventional political discourse (Main 2018). Alt-Right leaders argue that gradual efforts to bring white nationalist perspectives into mainstream culture will more effectively yield social transformation than immediate attempts to reshape prevailing political structures (Stern 2019). For this reason, the Alt-Right focuses on embedding their message within highly visible and easy to access platforms that reach broad audiences. Movement leaders and followers alike produce and share online content on mainstream platforms to be viewed by Alt-Right adherents as well as those who are not a part of the movement. The extensive reach of the Internet provides the movement with a stage for their message and has played an integral role in the Alt-Right's metapolitical goals.

Because whites are generally averse to overt discussion of race (Bonilla-Silva 2017), the Alt-Right's racially explicit messages are often too extreme for general audiences (Stern 2019). To bridge the gap between socially acceptable discourse and racist extremism, the Alt-Right employs several strategies. The Alt-Right's white supremacist message is often veiled in humor or is framed in pseudo-scientific and academic terms in efforts to provide intellectual legitimacy. The Alt-Right also benefits from the so-called "Alt-Lite," which refers to less extreme figures that give space for ideas such as the biological differences between various groups, yet do not espouse a

white nationalist ideology. Popular Canadian academic and YouTube personality Jordan Peterson is sometimes considered an example of a very moderate Alt-Lite figure (Stern 2019). While some Alt-Right followers harbor resentment towards the Alt-Lite for failing to openly acknowledge the movement's core beliefs², research by the SPLC suggests that many ideological adherents were first introduced to Alt-Right ideology by Alt-Lite figures (Ribeiro et al. 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center 2018).

Participants in the Alt-Right can be categorized in roughly three groups: the intellectual leadership, online content producers, and the broader constituency who consume movement content. Much of the current Alt-Right scholarship has focused on the first two groups. The Alt-Right's intellectual leadership includes individuals such as Richard Spencer, Jared Taylor, Greg Johnson, and Kevin MacDonald. Content producers include collectives like Red Ice TV and Murdoch Murdoch and individuals like Millennial Woes and Jazzhands McFeels. Intellectual leaders of the Alt-Right are typically highly educated (Spencer, Taylor, and Johnson hold graduate degrees and MacDonald was a professor of psychology at California State University–Long Beach) and are responsible for producing much of the movement's pseudo-scientific and academic content. Scholars and journalists often interview these movement figures and examine their writings (Hawley 2017; Main 2018) to analyze the intellectual foundation of the Alt-Right. Others have focused on the media distributed by the broader group of content producers on social media platforms such as YouTube and Reddit (Stern 2019) to

² Some Alt-Right content producers refer to this difference as the Alt-Lite's unwillingness to "name the Jew" or address the "JQ" (the Jewish Question).

understand the movement's core ideology and goals. By contrast, little to no work has examined the broader movement constituency who consume Alt-Right content.

Because the Alt-Right operates predominantly online in an anonymous and decentralized way, it is not clear who adheres to the movement's ideology, supports its goals, and consumes its content. However, journalists, advocacy organizations, and self-proclaimed leaders of the Alt-Right have offered numerous arguments about who they believe comprises the movement's constituency. Journalists and advocacy organizations frame the Alt-Right's membership as disaffected youth who are attracted to the movement's provocative and subversive online behavior (Roose 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center 2019). Self-proclaimed leadership of the Alt-Right assert that the movement's members are young and college-educated middle-class white professionals. Indeed, leading Alt-Right figure Richard Spencer describes the typical movement follower as: "someone who is thirty years old, who is a tech professional, who is an atheist, and who lives on one of the coasts" (Hawley 2017). Scholars who have interviewed Alt-Right leaders and studied the movement in depth suggest that the Alt-Right's constituency is markedly different from that of other racist organizations because of their refined white supremacist rhetoric (Main 2018) and use of satire and irony in spreading their message online (Hawley 2017).

Although it is plausible that the Alt-Right's anonymous constituency is highly educated and middle-class, this popular perception conflicts with what is known about other white supremacist groups. Qualitative research suggests that while racist organizations appeal to members from diverse class backgrounds, most of its membership comprises working-class and lower middle-class individuals experiencing economic

difficulties (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). Quantitative literature examining the social determinants of white supremacist organizing lend support for these findings, indicating that extreme-right organizing is positively associated with employment in working-class industries (Durso and Jacobs 2014; McVeigh 1999; McVeigh and Sikkink 2005) and is correlated with declines in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors (Van Dyke and Soule 2014). Additionally, traditional white supremacist organizations are more successful in areas with lower average earnings (Cunningham and Phillips 2007) and higher rates of unemployment (Durso and Jacobs 2014, McVeigh and Sikkink 2005). These empirical findings suggest that members of traditional racist organizations are less well-educated, economically vulnerable whites who are receptive to white supremacist explanations for their perceived hardship.

Although researchers, journalists, and advocacy organizations agree that the Alt-Right's constituency reflects a different membership base than that of traditional white supremacist organizations, they have had to rely on information from the movement's self-proclaimed leadership (Hawley 2017; Main 2018) and members who have left the Alt-Right (Gray 2019; Roose 2019) to inform their understanding. Interviews with disillusioned former members of the movement may contribute to an inaccurate or overgeneralized perception of the Alt-Right's constituency. Additionally, self-proclaimed leaders within the movement have an incentive to misrepresent the Alt-Right's membership as highly educated and professional to legitimize the movement's ideology and attract more members. Leaders of traditional racist organizations have used similar tactics to appeal to a broader audience. In the late 1970s David Duke, Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, attempted to recast the Klan's public image by

asserting its membership was highly educated and professional (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). The relatively wide perception that the Alt-Right's ideological adherents represent a different constituency relative to more traditional hate groups may therefore be incorrect.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORIES

To understand the social determinants of participation in white supremacist organizations, scholars frequently rely on resource mobilization, political opportunity, and ethnic competition theories. Resource mobilization theory and political opportunity theory examine the organizational capacity of social movements. Resource mobilization theory contends that the relative availability of social and economic resources determines a social movement organization's ability to form and sustain itself (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Because the Alt-Right is primarily an online movement, Internet access is largely the only resource necessary for sustaining the movement and its goals. Access to the Internet presents an insignificant barrier for movement success as Internet access is pervasive: 90 percent of adults in the U.S. use the Internet (Pew Research Center 2019). Political opportunity theory examines the role of political structures in facilitating or hindering social movement organizing (McAdam 2010; Meyer 2004). Because the Alt-Right has primarily "metapolitical" goals, is unorganized, is largely anonymous, and does not typically mobilize outside online platforms, neither political opportunity theory nor resource mobilization theory allow us to adequately analyze the social determinants of the movement.

By contrast, an ethnic competition framework allows us to understand the social determinants underlying the Alt-Right's shared grievances that sustain movement activity. Ethnic competition theories suggest that competition and conflict between dominant and minority group members occurs as a result of large or growing non-white populations posing a real or perceived demographic threat to the status of the dominant group (Blalock 1967; Olzak 1992). Competition between ethnically distinct groups for

the same social, economic, and political resources engenders collective actions by the aggrieved dominant group in efforts to preserve privileged status. Numerous studies of white supremacist mobilization support theoretical expectations established by ethnic competition theory, finding that relative size or growth of various non-white populations is positively associated with racist organizing (Beck 2000; McVeigh 1999; McVeigh; Myers and Sikkink 2004). Other studies find that the presence of a large or growing immigrant population is positively associated with anti-immigrant prejudice (Quillian 1995) and hostility towards minority group members (Olzak 1992).

Ethnic competition theories also emphasize the role of perceived economic threat in facilitating competition and conflict (Blalock 1967; Olzak 1992). Scarcity of economic resources encourages mobilization efforts by the dominant group to protect economic advantage. Research suggests that white supremacist organizations capitalize on economic downturn and whites' financial fears to expand movement membership (Blazak 2001). By using minority group members as scapegoats for whites' perceived economic hardship, racist organizations appeal to potential adherents' economic and racial concerns as a strategy for recruitment. Studies show that white supremacist and other extreme-right organizations experience greater success in areas with lower average earnings (Cunningham and Phillips 2007), higher unemployment (Durso and Jacobs 2014; McVeigh and Sikkink 2005), greater income inequality (Beck 2000; McVeigh 2004), and a declining labor force in manufacturing sectors (Van Dyke and Soule 2014). This research suggests that economically vulnerable whites join racist organizations to secure greater economic success for their perceived racial in-group and to resist the minority groups they blame for perceived financial insecurity.

HYPOTHESES

This thesis evaluates whether consumers of Alt-Right content are similar to participants in traditional white supremacist social movements or whether the Alt-Right's constituency is concentrated amongst a narrower, college-educated population. In this section, I develop paired sets of hypotheses that consider both possibilities. The first set of four hypotheses are derived from ethnic competition theory (Olzak 1992) and empirical research on traditional white supremacist movements (Cunningham and Phillips 2007; McVeigh 2004). These hypotheses propose that Alt-Right activity is positively correlated with traditional hate group participation and that the Alt-Right and traditional white supremacist social movements both appeal to a similar constituency by recruiting whites experiencing general threats to their social and economic status. The second set of four hypotheses is informed by recent scholarship on the Alt-Right (Hawley 2017; Main 2018; Stern 2019), which suggests that the movement appeals to a much narrower and highly educated set of individuals that are not reached by more traditional white supremacist social movements. These hypotheses propose that the size of the college graduate population and conditions affecting college-educated individuals' economic and social status are predictive of increased Alt-Right activity.

Alt-Right as Traditional Hate Group

Although they diverge in some of the political, religious and economic beliefs they promote, white supremacist organizations in the United States share a belief in the superiority of whites and in the need to address threats to whites' status through racial separation (Burris, Smith and Strahm 2000; Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). These shared tenets allow scholars to consider disparate organizations like the KKK, neo-Nazis,

racist skinheads, and Christian Identity groups as belonging to the same broader social movement (McVeigh 2004). The ideology promoted by leading figures of the Alt-Right falls squarely within this broad movement (Hawley 2017; Main 2018), which suggests the Alt-Right may actually appeal to the same constituency as more traditional white supremacist organizations. If the Alt-Right appeals to the same groups as traditional hate organizations, Alt-Right activity should be positively correlated with the presence of white supremacist organizations in a given county. Given that participation in the Alt-Right is limited almost entirely to online interactions and requires little to no time or monetary commitments, we expect this positive association even though social movement organizations with similar goals often compete for the same membership (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

Hypothesis 1: Traditional racist organizing is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

Demographic Threat. Ethnic competition theory argues that increased contact between dominant and minority group members generates competition for limited social and economic resources and provokes hostility from members of the dominant group who seek to preserve their privileged status (Olzak 1992). Framing non-whites and other minorities as a threat to whites' position in the social order, racist groups exploit local demographic conditions to appeal to whites' racial anxieties and position their organization as a solution to perceived demographic threats (Blazak 2001; Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). Studies show that large or growing non-white populations are predictive of traditional racist organizing (Beck 2000; McVeigh 1999; McVeigh, Myers and Sikkink 2004). If the Alt-Right is similar to traditional racist organizations, we would

expect Alt-Right activity to be positively correlated with the relative population size of all non-white groups.

Hypothesis 2: The relative size of racial minority populations is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

Ethnic competition theory also postulates that dominant group hostility towards minority group members is exacerbated not only by perceived demographic threat posed by native-born non-whites but also by a large or growing immigrant population (Olzak 1992).

Empirical research supports this argument and indicates that nativist sentiment is positively correlated with the relative size of the foreign-born population (Quillian 1995). Additionally, research has shown that traditional white supremacist recruitment is more successful in areas with larger immigrant populations (McVeigh, Myers and Sikkink 2004). Similar to traditional white supremacist organizations, the Alt-Right frames non-white immigration as a threat to whites' status (Hawley 2017). If the Alt-Right appeals to the same constituency as more traditional hate groups, we would expect Alt-Right activity to be positively correlated with the relative size of non-white immigrant groups.

Hypothesis 3: The relative size of non-white immigrant groups is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

Economic Threat. Another central component of ethnic competition theory involves competition between groups over scarce economic resources. Competition for finite economic resources such as jobs and wages intensifies as a result of economic contraction (Olzak 1992). Capitalizing upon local economic contraction, traditional racist organizations appeal to economically aggrieved whites by providing white supremacist explanations and solutions for potential adherents' economic troubles (Blazak 2001;

McVeigh 2009). Indeed, racist organizations boast greater success in areas experiencing general economic hardship (Durso and Jacobs 2014; McVeigh 2004; McVeigh and Sikkink 2005) and where whites in particular face economic vulnerability (Beck 2000; Cunningham and Phillips 2007). Some evidence suggests that whites who hold beliefs closely associated with Alt-Right ideology do indeed tend to be less economically prosperous. Using data from non-Hispanic white respondents to the 2016 American National Election Survey, Hawley (2018) shows that respondents without college degrees and with low income levels are more likely to support white identity politics—a core component of Alt-Right ideology. If the Alt-Right appeals to the same constituency as traditional white supremacist organizations, we would expect participation in the Alt-Right as a media consumer to be more prevalent in areas where whites experience poor economic outcomes.

Hypothesis 4: Economic hardships for whites are positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

Alt-Right as Mobilizing a Unique Constituency

Although the Alt-Right's white supremacist ideology is similar to that of traditional hate organizations, journalistic work and prominent Alt-Right figures suggest that the Alt-Right may appeal to a different constituency. These sources suggest that the movement's participants are predominantly composed of college-educated professionals (Hawley 2017; Main 2018). Organized racism in the U.S. tends to appeal to aggrieved working- and lower middle-class whites (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997) and is more popular in areas with more employment in working-class occupations (Durso and Jacobs 2014; McVeigh 1999; McVeigh and Sikkink 2005). If the Alt-Right's constituency is

concentrated amongst highly educated individuals, we would expect more movement activity in counties with more college graduates.

Hypothesis 5: The percentage of college graduates within a county is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

Demographic Threat. If the Alt-Right's constituency is college-educated, highly educated non-white groups would more likely be in direct competition with whites for the same job opportunities than less educated racial minorities. Educational attainment levels in the U.S. vary dramatically across racial and ethnic groups. Average education levels for Asian-Americans are much higher than average levels for whites. Thirty-five percent of white adults age 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree, compared to 54% for Asian-Americans (de Brey et al. 2019). Average education levels for Blacks and Latinos, by contrast, are much lower than for whites. Roughly 21% of Blacks and 15% of Latinos in the U.S. are college graduates. Due to this racial disparity in educational attainment, we would expect that the Alt-Right's constituency would experience more competition for social and economic resources such as jobs, housing, and college admissions in areas where the Asian population is large. By contrast, we would not expect the size of the Black and Latino populations to influence participation in the Alt-Right, as these groups would not likely be in direct competition with the Alt-Right's college-educated constituency.

Hypothesis 6: The relative size of the Asian population is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media, but not the relative size of the Black and Latino populations.

Although overall educational attainment of immigrants to the U.S. is roughly equal to that of the U.S. native-born population (roughly 30% of both groups hold a college degree), educational attainment varies widely amongst immigrant groups from different regions of origin. Immigrant populations from South and East Asia, the Middle East, Canada and Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa have higher rates of college graduation than the U.S. native-born population. Respectively, 53%, 48%, 44%, and 41% of these immigrant groups are college graduates. By contrast, immigrant groups from the Caribbean and Central America have lower rates of college education, with a respective 21% and 11% of these groups holding bachelor's degrees. On par with educational attainment of the native-born population, 32% of South American immigrants to the U.S. have a bachelor's degree (Radford 2019). If the Alt-Right's constituency is predominantly college-educated, we would expect that only highly skilled and educated immigrant groups would pose a labor market threat to the movement's constituency. Therefore, we would expect Alt-Right activity to be positively correlated with immigration from South and East Asia, the Middle East, Canada and Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South America.

Hypothesis 7: The relative size of highly educated immigrant groups *only* is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

Economic Threat. Social movement organizations respond to conditions directly affecting their constituents. Research on traditional white supremacist organizations suggests that racist groups are more successful at recruiting economically vulnerable whites by positioning their group as a solution to economic conditions burdening low status individuals (Blazak 2001; McVeigh 2009). Research on the Alt-Right, however,

suggests that the Alt-Right's more palatable, pseudo-academic version of white supremacy attracts constituents from a narrower, highly educated base (Hawley 2017; Main 2018). Although the movement's constituency may be narrower than previous racist organizations, economic conditions faced by the Alt-Right's base should similarly be predictive of movement activity. If the Alt-Right's constituency is concentrated amongst college-educated individuals, we would expect to observe greater Alt-Right activity in areas where white college graduates experience poor economic outcomes.

Hypothesis 8: Economic hardship for college graduates is positively associated with consumption of Alt-Right online media.

DATA & METHODS

Social movement scholars frequently rely on data compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project to study racist organizations in the United States (Durso and Jacobs 2014; McVeigh 2004; Ward 2017). The SPLC constructs annual lists of hate groups by tracking organization activities such as rallies, meetings, speeches, hate crimes, and leafletting (Southern Poverty Law Center 2019). These data are generally considered the most exhaustive available for studying racist extremism in the U.S. (McVeigh and Sikkink 2005). However, because the SPLC primarily tracks the in-person activities of racist organizations, these data are inappropriate for examining the Alt-Right, which is primarily limited to Internet-based participation. Yet just like the in-person activities of traditional hate organizations, the Alt-Right's Internet-based activities leave digital traces that can be documented and tracked. Here, I examine Alt-Right online activity by tracking searches for Alt-Right content. I use search volume as a proxy for consumption of Alt-Right media.

Due to the challenges associated with researching participation in the Alt-Right through traditional survey and interview methods, I argue that digital trace data provide the most suitable alternative and allow us to effectively track the Alt-Right's anonymous and online constituency. Each time a search engine is queried, the search parameters and some information about the user are documented—including their geographic location. Online search platforms often make these data available in non-identifiable, geographically aggregated form. Researchers in epidemiology (Ginsberg et al. 2009; Seifter et al. 2010) and the social sciences (Bail, Merhout and Ding 2018; Stephens-Davidowitz 2014; Vosen and Schmidt 2011) have used web search data to study a wide

range of topics. Given social desirability biases, Internet search data are particularly useful as an alternative to survey research when studying sensitive topics and socially unfavorable attitudes (DiGrazia 2017). This makes Internet search data particularly useful for this project. Because of the socially unfavorable nature of participation in a white supremacist movement, respondents are unlikely to divulge their participation in the Alt-Right to a researcher. Indeed, attempts to interview anonymous followers of the movement have largely been unsuccessful. Anonymous Alt-Right interviewees have often deliberately provided false information in efforts to “troll” journalists (Hawley 2017).

Researchers have used various online services to collect online trace data. Many have relied on data accessed through Google Trends (Choi and Varian 2012; Preis, Moat and Stanley 2013), which documents the relative popularity of search queries across different regions. Another Google service—Google Ads—provides more granular search volume data at various geographic levels including nations, states, cities, and counties (Bail, Merhout and Ding 2018). Because Google Ads provides more detailed geographic data than Google Trends, I collected county-level search volume data using this service’s Keyword Planner Tool. Designed for marketing research and digital advertisement campaigns, the Keyword Planner Tool provides data on monthly search volumes for requested search queries, in increments of ten searches. As Bail and colleagues (2018) note, the precise methodology used to determine search volumes is not known to researchers. While this is an important drawback, Internet search data still provide an effective way to capture the geographic distribution of Alt-Right online activity and

provide one of the few ways to study the social determinants of the movement empirically.

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable is the average monthly search volume for 25 search terms for Alt-Right content on Google and search partners. This includes the video streaming platform YouTube—identified as a major component of the Alt-Right’s success (Berger 2018, Ribeiro et al. 2019). Data were obtained for all 3,142 U.S. counties and county-equivalents. To determine a list of Alt-Right search queries, I drew on two sources: 1) Main’s (2018) analysis of several prominent Alt-Right websites and 2) a list of recommended websites and content on an Alt-Right discussion forum on Reddit. Of the twenty-five search queries used eleven are websites, six are YouTube channels or podcast productions, five are individuals producing content under their own names, and three are pseudonymous content producers. For a more detailed description of each keyword, see Table 1. This table provides the average monthly search volume for selected Alt-Right websites, podcasts and channels, and content producers in the U.S. To ensure that search terms returned only relevant results in Google, I queried each term individually to verify that the target content appeared in the first three search results. For modelling purposes, I use the monthly average search volume over the two-year period covering January 2017 to December 2018.

Table 1. List of Alt-Right Keywords

Type of media	Keywords	Average monthly search volume
Websites	<i>VDARE, The Right Stuff, The Daily Stormer, Radix Journal, American Renaissance, Counter Currents Publishing, Occidental Dissent, Occidental Observer, National Policy Institute, 4chan /pol/</i>	307,533
Podcasts and channels	<i>Red Ice TV, Black Pigeon Speaks, Radio 3Fourteen, Merchant Minute, Murdoch Murdoch, Fash the Nation, The Daily Shoah</i>	40,197
Content producers	Jazzhands McFeels, Millennial Woes, Morrakiu, Jean-François Gariépy, Nicholas J. Fuentes, James Allsup, Mark Collett, Stefan Molyneux	80,430

This measure can be contrasted to the more standard SPLC Intelligence Project data typically used in studies of white supremacist organizations. The SPLC provides data on white nationalist groups, many of which are a part of the Alt-Right and some of which actually produce some of the content included in my list of search queries. Because of the overlap between the SPLC’s white nationalist category and my dependent variable, I compared my measure with the SPLC’s. While the SPLC identifies white nationalist group activity in fewer than 3% of counties, roughly 99% of counties had online searches for Alt-Right content. This stark disparity suggests that my digital trace measure catches significantly more activity than the SPLC’s white nationalist group measure. This is unsurprising, given that the SPLC’s measure primarily includes headquarters for Alt-Right digital media organizations and provides very little information about the consumers of Alt-Right content. My dependent variable more effectively tracks the geographic distribution of the Alt-Right’s constituency because my

measure captures online search behavior driven by the largest category of Alt-Right participants—consumers and sharers of online content.

Racist Organizations

As previously discussed, the SPLC Intelligence Project tracks the presence of hate organizations across the U.S. by studying movement activity and reviewing organization documents (Southern Poverty Law Center 2019). The Intelligence Project also relies on information from citizens, law enforcement agencies, and news media outlets. To compare the Alt-Right and traditional racist organizing, I rely on binary measures indicating the presence of Ku Klux Klan, neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi, Christian Identity, Racist Skinhead, hate music, and white nationalist groups across U.S. counties in 2018.

Demographic Threat

Demographic threat, economic threat, and control variables are from the 2013-2017 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year-estimates. Though these data are less current than the one- or three-year-estimates, they are more reliable for county-level analyses due to their more accurate estimates for less populous counties.

Models include ten measures capturing demographic threat experienced by the white population. To assess threat posed by the non-white population, I calculate the ratios of the Black, Latino, and Asian populations relative to the white population. To assess the influence of various immigrant groups on Alt-Right interest, I calculate the ratios of foreign-born populations from East/South Asia, the Middle-East, Europe/Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, South America, and Sub-Saharan Africa relative to the native-born population.³ All ratio variables are standardized such

³ Some studies find a curvilinear effect of non-white and minority populations on extreme-right organizing

that a one-unit increase in the variable represents a standard deviation change in the underlying measure.

Economic Threat

To capture the economic vulnerability of the county's white population, I use the percentage of the county's white population beneath the poverty line. Similarly, I use the percentage of county residents age twenty-five or older with a bachelor's degree beneath the poverty line to assess economic conditions for the college graduate population.

Previous research has used median white income to measure the economic vulnerability of the white population (Cunningham and Phillips 2007). I chose not to use this measure because, 1) an equivalent income measure for the college-educated population is not available in the ACS, and 2) (log) white median income is strongly correlated with (log) overall median income ($r = 0.89$). This high collinearity means that coefficients estimates for white median income are not expected to be reliable in models that control for median income (as is the case here).

Control Variables

Because online search behavior is dependent upon access to the Internet, I expect there will be more searches for Alt-Right content in areas with greater rates of Internet usage. Following Bail, Merhout and Ding (2018), I use (log) search volume for the term "weather" as a proxy measure of overall Internet usage. I also include measures controlling for (log) total population and (log) population density for each county. To

(Boutcher, Jenkins and Van Dyke 2017, Durso and Jacobs 2014, Ward 2017), suggesting that mobilization is hindered when the minority population is above a particular threshold. Due to the low social and economic risks associated with anonymous Alt-Right participation, this nonlinear relationship is not expected even in majority non-white areas. Model fit statistics also suggest that quadratic terms are not needed in the models.

account for socioeconomic differences between counties, I include a measure controlling for (log) median household income. Models also control for the percentage of the population age 25 and older who have a bachelor's degree (coefficient estimates for this variable are also used to test hypothesis 5). To account for demographic differences between counties, I control for the percentage of county population that is non-white and the percentage of county population that is foreign-born.⁴

Analytic Procedure

Because county-level search volume for Alt-Right content is a count variable, I use negative binomial regression to estimate my models. Negative binomial regression is more suitable than a Poisson model for these data due to the presence of overdispersion in the dependent variable. Negative binomial regression addresses this overdispersion by including an additional parameter accounting for unobserved heterogeneity in the outcome variable (Long and Freese 2014).

⁴ I do not include these control measures in the demographic threat models because the main theoretical variables in these models capture this effect.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents coefficient estimates from negative binomial regression models predicting county-level search volume for Alt-Right keywords. Robust standard errors are provided in parentheses. Coefficients provide the expected log difference in keyword search volumes. For example, the 0.17 coefficient for the (log) population variable indicates that a percentage point increase in (log) population is associated with an approximately $e^{0.17} - 1 = 0.18$ or 18% increase in the search volume for Alt-Right content, net of effects of other covariates. Coefficient estimates for the control variables suggest that the size of the overall immigrant population is positively associated with Alt-Right activity, the percentage of non-white county residents is negatively associated with search volume for Alt-Right content, and (log) median income shares no significant association with movement activity. The estimated direction and significance of these coefficients are broadly consistent across all models (with the exception of the income coefficient in the second model of table 2).

Models 1 and 2 assess whether the Alt-Right shares its constituency with traditional white supremacist organizations or whether it draws from a narrower constituency of college-educated individuals. Model 1 presents estimates from a baseline model examining the relationship between the percentage of college graduates and search volume for Alt-Right content at the county-level, controlling for measures of population, socioeconomic status (SES), demographic characteristics, and Internet usage. Estimates from the model suggest that the size of the college-educated population in a given county is positively associated with search volume for Alt-Right content. This is consistent with hypothesis 5 and suggests that the Alt-Right's constituency may differ from that of

traditional white supremacist organizations'. Model 2 provides further evidence and assesses the association between searches for Alt-Right content and the presence of traditional racist groups. Model 2 includes all variables from the first model and introduces variables indicating the presence of various types of white supremacist organizations. Estimates from the model show that the presence of Klan, neo-Nazi, Christian Identity, neo-Confederate, skinhead, or hate music groups in a given county does not significantly impact search volume for Alt-Right content.⁵

Overall, these estimates provide no support for hypothesis 1, suggesting that consumption of Alt-Right media is not related to traditional racist organizing. By contrast, results from the second model lend support for hypothesis 5. Counties with larger percentages of college graduates have higher volumes of searches for Alt-Right content. This relationship remains positive and significant across models net of controls and presence of traditional hate groups, further suggesting that the Alt-Right and its constituency are different from traditional white supremacist organizations.

⁵ As expected, the presence of a white nationalist group (several of which explicitly identify as part of the Alt-Right) has a significant and positive effect on Alt-Right search volume. This provides evidence for the validity of my dependent variable as a measure of Alt-Right participation.

Table 2. Negative Binomial Regressions Predicting County-Level Search Volume for Alt-Right Content, Baseline Models

	Model 1	Model 2
Klan		-0.062 (0.056)
Neo-Nazi		0.022 (0.063)
Christian Identity		-0.029 (0.089)
Neo-Confederates		0.105 (0.062)
Skinhead		0.063 (0.104)
Hate music		-0.065 (0.066)
White nationalist		0.086* (0.042)
% College	0.030*** (0.002)	0.029*** (0.002)
Income (log)	-0.012 (0.058)	-0.006 (0.058)
% Immigrant	0.009*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)
% non-white	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)
Population (log)	0.163*** (0.036)	0.159*** (0.036)
Population density (log)	-0.025* (0.011)	-0.025* (0.011)
Weather (log)	0.734*** (0.034)	0.734*** (0.034)
Constant	-4.668*** (0.600)	-4.695*** (0.600)
log(α)	-1.957*** (0.059)	-1.962*** (0.060)
N	3142	3142

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test).

Demographic Threat

Table 3 presents estimates from negative binomial regression models predicting the effects of county-level demographic composition on search volume for Alt-Right

media. Robust standard errors are provided in parentheses. Model 1 examines the relationship between the size of Black, Latino, and Asian populations relative to the size of the white population and search volume for Alt-Right content controlling again for measures of population, SES, and Internet usage. Estimates show that searches for Alt-Right media are negatively associated with the relative size of Black and Latino populations but positively associated with the relative size of the Asian population.

The negative relationship between relative size of Black and Latino populations is inconsistent with hypothesis 2 and sharply contrasts with previous work that generally finds a positive or curvilinear association between size of non-white groups and racist organizing (Beck 2000; Boutcher, Jenkins and Van Dyke 2017; McVeigh, Myers and Sikkink 2004). That Alt-Right activity is positively associated only with the size of the Asian population provides support for hypothesis 6. These results further suggest that the Alt-Right's constituency is college-educated and is sensitive to real or perceived demographic threats posed by highly educated non-white groups.

Model 2 includes variables indicating the size of various immigrant populations relative to the size of the native-born population, in addition to control variables from the previous model. Estimates show that immigration from Europe and Canada as well as East and South Asia are positively associated with searches for Alt-Right content. Coefficients indicate that immigration from Central America, the Caribbean, South America⁶, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East have a non-significant or negative

⁶ Examination of the Cook's distance suggest that Miami-Dade County, Florida is a multivariate outlier that impacts coefficient estimates in the immigrant model. While direction, size, and significance of nearly all coefficients remain substantively the same when excluding this county from the estimation sample, the coefficient for immigrant population from South America is not robust to its exclusion and becomes non-significant.

effect on search volume for Alt-Right media. Net of controls and measures of demographic threat, the percentage of college graduates remains significantly and positively correlated with search volume for Alt-Right content. These results suggest little support for hypothesis 3: of the six predominantly non-white immigrant populations, only immigration from East and South Asia—the group with the highest average educational attainment—has a significant positive effect on Alt-Right keyword searches. Combined with estimates showing that immigration from Europe and Canada has a significant positive effect on search volume for Alt-Right content, model 2 provides strong support for hypothesis 7. Although not all of the more highly educated immigrant groups have a significant effect on Alt-Right activity, it is particularly striking that immigration from Europe and Canada, which is presumably overwhelmingly white—is positively associated with search volume for Alt-Right content.

The significant and negative coefficient for sub-Saharan African immigration—another highly educated immigrant population—may appear inconsistent with hypothesis 7. Immigration from this region is a relatively small portion of immigration to the U.S., however, representing only 4 percent of the foreign-born population (Anderson and Connor 2018). Estimates for the ACS suggest that a major portion of this population is concentrated in counties surrounding Washington, D.C. (author’s estimates), which may not follow expected patterns given its unique status as the seat of government. Labor market dynamics for professionals likely operate differently in that context.

Overall, these results suggest that the Alt-Right’s constituency is sensitive to competition within the labor market posed by a highly skilled immigrant labor force, as opposed to non-white immigration more generally.

Table 3. Negative Binomial Regressions Predicting County-Level Search Volume for Alt-Right Content, Demographic Threat Models

	Model 1	Model 2
Black/White	-0.101*** (0.012)	
Latino/White	-0.029*** (0.008)	
Asian/White	0.028* (0.012)	
Mexico/Central America		-0.029** (0.010)
Caribbean		0.017 (0.016)
South America		-0.040* (0.019)
Sub-Saharan Africa		-0.035*** (0.008)
Europe/Canada		0.041** (0.013)
Middle East		0.003 (0.013)
East/South Asia		0.038* (0.016)
% college	0.032*** (0.002)	0.028*** (0.002)
Income (log)	-0.048 (0.057)	0.120* (0.056)
Population (log)	0.154*** (0.036)	0.163*** (0.036)
Population density (log)	-0.001 (0.010)	-0.009 (0.011)
Weather (log)	0.715*** (0.033)	0.703*** (0.033)
Constant	-4.235*** (0.587)	-5.940*** (0.572)
log(α)	-1.961*** (0.060)	-1.932*** (0.059)
N	3142	3142

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test).

Economic Threat

Table 4 presents estimates from nested negative binomial regression models predicting the effects of county-level economic conditions on search volume for Alt-Right content. Robust standard errors are provided in parentheses. Model 1 examines the relationship between economic hardship for whites and search activity for Alt-Right content, controlling for county-level measures of population, demographic characteristics, and Internet usage. Among the control variables, I find that the size of the immigrant population, the size of the college graduate population, and (log) median income have a positive and significant association with search volume for Alt-Right content in models 1 through 3. The size of the non-white population has a negative and significant association with Internet searches for Alt-Right media.

Estimates from model 1 show that search volume for Alt-Right content is positively associated with the white poverty rate. This finding provides support for hypothesis 4, indicating that economic hardship for the white population is associated with more Alt-Right activity. This relationship is consistent with studies that show a positive association between poor economic outcomes for whites and traditional racist organizing (Beck 2000; Cunningham and Phillips 2007). It should be noted, however, that (log) median income is positively associated with search volume for Alt-Right content. This finding is inconsistent with ethnic competition theory, which posits that overall economic contraction fuels grievances by the dominant group. Overall, these results suggest that while the Alt-Right's appeal is likely driven by poor economic outcomes for whites, Alt-Right activity tends to occur in more economically prosperous communities.

Model 2 includes county-level control measures from the first model and a measure of economic hardship for those with college degrees. Coefficient estimates from the second model show that search volume for Alt-Right media is positively associated with the poverty rate for college graduates. These estimates are consistent with hypothesis 8, indicating that consumption of Alt-Right media is greater where the college-educated population is less economically prosperous. Similar to the previous model, (log) median income has a positive association with search volume for Alt-Right content. Taken together, results from model 2 suggest that the Alt-Right's constituency is reactive to perceived economic hardship for college graduates. It also generally occurs in wealthier areas, which is consistent with Alt-Right participants being primarily college-educated whites. Model 3 includes measures of economic hardship for both whites and college graduates, in addition to control measures from earlier models. In this full model, both white poverty and college poverty remain significant and positive.

Overall, estimates from table 3 suggest that the Alt-Right is sensitive to economic conditions faced by the white population, and more narrowly, the college-educated population. Results from this model lend further support for both hypotheses 4 and 8, indicating that Alt-Right activity is higher where the college graduate population and the white population experience more economic vulnerability.

Prior research on traditional white supremacist groups suggests that racist organizations appeal mainly to low-status whites facing social, economic, and political threat posed by large or growing minority populations. By contrast, results presented here indicate that the specific social determinants of participation in the Alt-Right differ from those of traditional racist organizations. Findings suggest that consumers of Alt-Right

media are primarily college-educated whites experiencing competition from highly educated minority populations. Overall, these findings lend support to scholars', journalists', and advocacy organizations' suggestions that the Alt-Right appeals to a different constituency from traditional white supremacist groups.

Table 4. Negative Binomial Regressions Predicting County-Level Search Volume for Alt-Right Content, Economic Threat Models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
White poverty	0.023*** (0.003)		0.017*** (0.003)
College poverty		0.155*** (0.024)	0.121*** (0.027)
% college	0.029*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.018*** (0.003)
Income (log)	0.416*** (0.081)	0.248*** (0.064)	0.510*** (0.081)
% immigrant	0.006* (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)
% non-white	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)
Population (log)	0.151*** (0.036)	0.167*** (0.034)	0.157*** (0.035)
Population density (log)	-0.032** (0.011)	-0.015 (0.011)	-0.022* (0.011)
Weather (log)	0.742*** (0.034)	0.719*** (0.034)	0.729*** (0.034)
Constant	-9.520*** (0.890)	-7.361*** (0.668)	-10.383*** (0.887)
log(α)	-1.997*** (0.061)	-2.005*** (0.062)	-2.024*** (0.062)
N	3142	3142	3142

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test).

CONCLUSION

The Alt-Right is a recently emerged white supremacist movement that has considerable ideological overlap with traditional racist organizations like the Klan, neo-Nazi, and skinhead groups. Yet, there are key differences distinguishing the Alt-Right from earlier forms of organized racism. Unlike traditional racist groups, the Alt-Right is unorganized, its activities occur almost entirely online, and its constituency remains mostly anonymous (Hawley 2017, Main 2018). As Hawley (2017) notes, this makes participation in the Alt-Right difficult to study. To understand the Alt-Right, journalists, advocacy organizations, and scholars have interviewed self-proclaimed movement leadership (Hawley 2017; Main 2018; Roose 2019) and analyzed Alt-Right ideas and media (Stern 2019). No quantitative research, however, has examined the broader social processes that shape Alt-Right activity. In this thesis, I used Internet search data to examine the county-level social determinants of Alt-Right media consumption. Doing so allowed me to determine whether the Alt-Right appealed to the same constituency as conventional white supremacist organizations, or whether it successfully mobilizes new, previously uninvolved social groups.

To assess the Alt-Right's relationship to traditional organized racism, I developed two sets of hypotheses informed by social movement research and scholarship on the Alt-Right. I expected that if the Alt-Right appealed to the same constituency as conventional white supremacist groups, consumption of Alt-Right media would be correlated with traditional racist organizing. In line with findings established by social movement literature, I also expected online activity to be positively associated with economic hardship for whites and the size of non-white and immigrant populations. However, if the

Alt-Right reaches a different, college-educated professional constituency as journalists, scholars, and movement leadership have suggested, I expected Alt-Right activity to be higher in areas with more college graduates and where the college-educated population experiences economic hardship. I also expected that only the presence of highly educated non-white and immigrant populations would have a positive effect on Alt-Right activity.

To test these expectations, I used county-level Internet search data collected via the Keyword Planner tool within Google Ads in conjunction with data from the American Community Survey and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Findings indicated that the social determinants of Alt-Right activity systematically differ from what I would expect if the Alt-Right were similar to traditional white supremacist organizations. Internet search volume for Alt-Right media is unrelated to the presence of an organized white supremacist group, but positively associated with the rate of college education net of measures of population, socioeconomic status, and Internet usage. Interestingly, counties with larger Black and Latino populations have fewer Internet searches for Alt-Right content, while movement activity is higher in areas with larger Asian populations. Similarly, search volume for Alt-Right content is lower in counties with a larger immigrant population from Central America (including Mexico) and higher in areas with more European and Canadian as well as East and South Asian immigrants. Taken together, these findings suggest that perceived threat posed by the presence of highly educated non-white and immigrant groups is key to the Alt-Right's appeal.

Overall, the analyses presented here suggest that the Alt-Right and its constituency are markedly different from traditional racist organizations. Whereas the membership base of other white supremacist groups have predominantly been

concentrated amongst working- and lower middle-classes (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997), my analyses suggest that the Alt-Right's constituency is highly educated and, therefore, presumably concentrated in higher social class positions. This is particularly striking because individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to report racist and anti-Semitic attitudes and tend to hold more socially liberal views (Case, Greeley and Fuchs 1989; Heerwig and McCabe 2009; Wagner and Zick 1995; Weil 1985). Despite its highly educated constituency, the Alt-Right has adopted the same virulently racist and anti-Semitic ideology espoused by other white supremacist organizations in the U.S. As some have suggested, the white supremacist underpinnings of the Alt-Right's ideology are not new (Futrell and Simi 2017). However, the social determinants of Alt-Right activity suggest that adherence to the movement is motivated by a very different set of social processes than have been seen in the past.

Some scholars argue that the emergence of the Alt-Right has been fueled by social media and search engine algorithms contributing to the consumption and adoption of far right and racist ideology (Daniels 2018). Though traditional white supremacist organizations were early adopters of Internet technology for recruitment purposes and to provide their constituencies with anonymous platforms for extremist beliefs (Gerstenfeld, Grant and Chiang 2003), research suggests that most hate group activity online occurs within isolated communities designed to reinforce group solidarity and participation amongst movement members (Futrell and Simi 2004). The Alt-Right, however, has embedded itself within mainstream platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit. Capitalizing upon social media and search engine algorithms, the Alt-Right and its constituency adeptly use the Internet to reach a broader audience than has previously

been reached online by traditional white supremacist organizations. This skillful insertion of Alt-Right ideology into highly visible places explains a portion of how the Alt-Right experiences greater exposure and success amongst a different set of constituents than traditional racist organizations.

Yet, technological processes alone do little to explain why some highly educated people—a population that has previously been shown to adhere to an ideology of colorblind racism—have adopted overtly racist and anti-Semitic beliefs. I propose that the Alt-Right appeals to aggrieved college graduates facing threats to their privileged status by providing an outlet for the expression of socially undesirable beliefs. The anonymity provided by the Internet allows individuals to consume and produce white supremacist content without jeopardizing their economic and social status. For those with college degrees and professional positions especially, participation in a traditional white supremacist organization poses significant social and financial risks. White supremacist demonstrators and members of racist hate organizations who have had their affiliations exposed have faced consequences such as removal from their universities (Roll 2017), loss of their jobs (Zraick 2019), and removal from positions in the military (Mathias 2019). It is within this context of decreasing tolerance for overt displays of racism that the Alt-Right has appealed to a constituency of primarily aggrieved college graduates. The Alt-Right uses accessible online platforms to provide an anonymous digital safe haven for those who are unable to participate in a traditional racist organization. The social determinants of Alt-Right activity markedly contrast with those of organized racist groups not because the Alt-Right's ideology is dissimilar but because the movement provides an alternative outlet for extremist beliefs.

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