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Selling Violent Extremism

Danny Klinenberg

Abstract

Why do people join domestic violent extremist organizations? This paper examines an understudied reason: organizational outreach. I study how the inflow of new members to the Oath Keepers, America's largest paramilitary organization, is affected when the group's leadership employs three tactics: showcasing their ideological zeal through armed standoffs with the government, membership discounts, and sports sponsorships. Using a variant of the synthetic control method, I find that standoffs increase new memberships by 150 percent, discounts increase new memberships by over 60 percent, and sports sponsorships decrease new memberships. Membership is less responsive in counties with higher income inequality, but is more responsive in politically conservative counties. The findings provide new insights into ways extremist groups attract potential recruits.

Keywords: Far-right extremism; recruitment; push-pull factors; causal inference

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1. Introduction

Domestic violent extremism has recently migrated from the fringes of American society to become a major security threat (Homeland Security 2023; U. S. Government Accountability Office 2023). The movement's large size and potential to destabilize institutions became apparent to most Americans on January 6, 2021 — the insurrection at the Capitol. Previous work has studied how individual or societal characteristics cause people to join such movements, including economic misfortunes, dissatisfaction with the political landscape, and interpersonal qualms (Jefferson and Pryor 1999; Piazza 2016; Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James 2018; Wolfowicz et al. 2019; McAlexander, Rubin, and Williams 2023). However, recruitment tactics used to attract new members have been largely overlooked within economics and political science. This paper aims to provide the first causal evidence on how domestic violent extremist groups recruit, which methods are effective, and where they work best.

The literature proposes that radicalization happens through the “three Ps”: Push, Personal, and Pull (Vergani et al. 2018). Push refers to societal characteristics that lead people to radicalize, while personal identifies individual characteristics related to radicalization (e.g., Victoroff 2005; Ozer, Obaidi, and Pfattheicher 2020). Pull factors are organizational characteristics that entice people to join, such as group belonging, messaging, and financial incentives (Vergani et al. 2018). This study focuses on two understudied pull factors extremist organizations employ: decreased barriers to entry and signals of ideology. First, groups can offer discounts on membership dues that reduce barriers to entry. This tactic is particularly useful for a new, unknown extremist organization because group membership is an experience good: a potential recruit must try it to learn if they like it (Shapiro 1983; Milgrom and Roberts 1986). According to theory, lowering entry barriers should boost initial signups (Fryer and Levitt 2012). Second, organizations attract new members by signalling ideology (Mitts, Phillips, and Walter 2022; Bloom 2004; Jaeger et al. 2014; Vogt, Gleditsch, and Cederman 2021). Theory suggests that credible signals of ideology should attract new members, while actions that exclusively increase name recognition should not. I rigorously test these three predictions.

I investigate the theoretical predictions using evidence from three recruitment tactics employed by the Oath Keepers. The group is the largest militia in the United States with approximately 40,000 registered members, and was an instrumental actor in the insurrection at the United States' Capitol on January 6, 2021 with its leader being found guilty of sedition (ADL 2022). First, I test whether lower barriers to entry increase recruitment by estimating the effect of holiday discounts on yearly membership subscriptions. The Oath Keepers charged annual dues, but offered 25 percent off during select holidays. Second, I test whether credible signals of ideology increase membership

by estimating how militia-style confrontations affect recruitment. These events, referred to as callouts, started as armed standoffs obstructing federal operations during the Obama administration, and then transitioned into pseudo-security supporting the Trump presidency. Finally, I test whether actions of pure salience have nonpositive effects on recruitment by estimating the effect of sponsoring a NASCAR driver. For three months, the Oath Keepers was the primary sponsor for a NASCAR driver, which meant their logo was prominently displayed on the car. It could be easily seen during races, and the driver did interviews supporting the organization.¹

Two major challenges have precluded testing domestic extremist recruitment theories: data and identification. Researchers have never had access to a domestic extremist organization's recruitment records nor a dossier of activities. I overcome this challenge by leveraging the Oath Keepers' leaked data. It includes a membership roster detailing the location and join date for nearly 40,000 members, and the organization's internal forum providing a complete record of recruitment efforts. The second challenge is isolating the tactics' causal effects. I account for potential confounders by comparing recruitment data to a synthetic counterfactual constructed from other extremist groups' Google Trends. The synthetic data captures general changes in recruitment through search activity, which is correlated with member inflows because organizations encourage online signups. This controls for movement-wide shocks, such as a major rally or political event, that would otherwise bias the findings. To check the robustness of my effects, I also conduct a simpler before-after analysis, which yields similar estimates.

Using a synthetic control framework (Brodersen et al. 2015), I find that the 25 percent membership discounts attract over 400 new members nationally during the discounts, equating to 2.5 percent of all recruitment between 2013 and 2018. Additionally, armed callouts strongly affect the inflow of new members. Those events cause over 1,000 new member signups during the events, equating to 5 percent of all recruitment between 2013 and 2018. The effects were temporary: inflows of new members returned to pre-tactic levels after the standoffs and discounts ended. Conversely, advertising alone is an ineffective tactic to drive recruitment. The NASCAR sponsorship caused a decrease in new membership, which persisted for at least two weeks after the campaign concluded.

The tactics provide three new insights into extremist recruitment. First, even extremist recruitment is quite sensitive to small changes in price. A simple \$10 discount attracted hundreds of new members to an ostensibly ideological group. This suggests the presence of a non-negligible pool of potential recruits that can be easily swayed into joining an extremist group, supporting the theoretical prediction that reducing barriers to entry increases membership. Second, credible signs of ideology is an exceptionally

¹ An image can be found here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221224021731/https://www.jayski.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2019/06/2013n-79-oathkeepers-card.jpg>

effective recruitment tactic. As predicted by theory, recruits respond strongest when the Oath Keepers organize and participate in armed standoffs against federal officials. In contrast, nonideological signals of capacity backfired. The NASCAR sponsorship demonstrated that the Oath Keepers was successful enough to fund a professional athlete for months, yet deterred potential recruits. The lackluster effect of the NASCAR campaign suggests that increases in salience alone does not increase recruitment—prospective recruits need, first and foremost, ideological messaging to become dues-paying members.

Robustness tests show that tactics were not adopted in anticipation of or response to changes in the demand for membership. I find that recruitment is relatively constant before and after each tactic, meaning that potential recruits did not anticipate or stockpile membership. Additionally, there is no evidence that the Oath Keepers exploited seasonal variations in demand during the tactics. This is also supported by testimony claiming that the Oath Keepers was controlled by its founder Stewart Rhodes (Tatenhove 2023, 159), who used the organization to fund his personal life (Wilson 2022). While some tactics coincided with major extremist events and patriotic holidays, whether the organization planned and participated in the first place was likely driven by the founder's personal interests.

Finally, I examine the interaction between push and pull factors—an overlooked aspect of domestic extremist recruitment—using county-level analysis. Contrary to the predictions of the relative deprivation hypothesis, counties with less income inequality responded strongest to the first two discounts and callout events. This provides the first evidence of less income inequality amplifying extremist pull factors in the United States. Second, counties with the largest share of votes for the Republican or Libertarian presidential candidate responded more strongly to discounts than counties with the lowest share. Put simply, the Oath Keepers' efforts to pull in potential recruits are more effective in the most politically conservative counties, compared to the most politically liberal.

I provide the first causal estimates of the effectiveness of domestic violent extremist recruitment tactics. When studying extremism, researchers usually use measures that are noisy proxies for membership: observed activities (Sean E. Mulholland 2012; Van Dijcke and Wright 2021; Rodrik 2021), social media activity (Müller and Schwarz 2020, 2023; McAlexander, Rubin, and Williams 2023; Bailard et al. 2024), extremist organization chapters per state (Jefferson and Pryor 1999; Savage and Wimmer 2023), or election results (Steinmayr 2021; Caprettini et al. 2021; Cagé et al. 2023; Friebe, Liebold, and Sabet 2023; Cuccu and Pontarollo 2024). This is because obtaining information on domestic violent groups, even as general as the number of members per year, is difficult due to a culture of skepticism towards outsiders (Croft 2021; Williams et al. 2022). My work is the first analysis to focus on domestic violent extremist

recruitment efforts utilizing membership data, which provides unprecedented access to the organization's inner workings.

This work contributes more broadly to the literature on extremist groups and signals. Researchers commonly study how extremist groups develop initiation processes to limit leaks, infiltration, and defection (Berman and Laitin 2008; Berman 2009; Sean E. Mulholland 2010; Morales, Raynold, and Li 2018). These are examples of recruits signalling dedication to an organization. I study the reverse: How do organizations signal quality to attract potential recruits? Before seeking entry, potential recruits must know that the organization exists and its ideology. My findings evaluate understudied ways that a domestic violent extremist organization pulls in new members, highlighting factors in these group's rise from obscurity to amassing tens of thousands of members capable of destabilizing a democracy.

The findings likely apply beyond the Oath Keepers to other domestic violent extremist groups. Although the Oath Keepers' target demographic, veterans and first responders, is more susceptible to joining an extremist movement (Chermak et al. 2024), many motives for joining are universal. Smith (2018) identifies key predictors of veteran involvement in extremism, which include a lack of sense of community, purpose, and belonging, sentiments also common outside the veteran population. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the relative effectiveness of the tactics employed by the Oath Keepers provide insights into the general extremist membership pool. Additionally, how one might suppress recruitment for the Oath Keepers is likely to apply towards other domestic violent extremist groups.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical literature guiding the analysis. Section 3 provides additional background on the Oath Keepers. Section 4 summarizes the data. Section 5 introduces the econometric model and its assumptions. The results and robustness checks are presented and discussed in Section 6. Section 7 studies the interaction between common push factors, including the level and spread of household income, voting patterns, rurality, and racial composition, and extremist pull factors. Section 8 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

A core challenge for any recruitment effort, especially a fledgling organization, is overcoming anonymity and ambiguity. Potential recruits cannot join if they do not know that the organization exists (anonymity), nor will they want to participate if there is insufficient information about the group's mission (ambiguity). Credible acts of ideology address both challenges by increasing the salience of the organization and reliably signaling the organization's ideology. Uninformed potential recruits can use this information to identify their "fit" in the organization, leading more to join. Pure acts of salience address anonymity, but not ambiguity. For an organization selling ideals, name recognition alone is unlikely to convince people to join. Finally, reduced barriers to entry are effective for those aware of the group, but unsure of their fit. Someone is more likely to sign up for a trial run of the organization if the initial cost is lower. Each testable hypothesis is formalized within the existing literature below.

A credible act of ideology is a strong signal of an organization's dedication to their beliefs. One example is an armed confrontation with government agencies. Why would this pull in new members? Previous work studying extremist pull factors focuses on the importance of projecting a message. Mitts, Phillips, and Walter (2022) found that nonviolent social media activity focused on ideology and lifestyle garners support for ISIS, while exclusively violent material decreased it. Similarly, Ingram (2015) found that the Islamic State increased membership by focusing on pragmatic factors, including security and identity arguments creating an "us versus them" scenario. Bloom (2004), Kydd and Walter (2006), and Jaeger et al. (2014) also find that credible signals of dedication, in their case violence against Israelis, increase a terrorist group's relative public support. Kruglanski et al. (2018) and Frischlich et al. (2019) find that potential recruits are more likely to join an extremist organization when the group utilizes narratives, or calls to a collective cause. Similarly, Rip, Vallerand, and Lafrenière (2012) argues that extremist organizations are most successful at recruiting when they utilize ideologically based passionate narratives. These findings lead to the following hypothesis:

H₁: Credible acts of ideology increase the inflow of new members.

Sports sponsorships increase the salience of a product or group (Minnesota Libraries Publishing 2015). Why would this pure act of salience be ineffective at recruiting extremists? The method effectively decreases anonymity through increased brand awareness within a target demographics. However, the marketing literature highlights that consumers prefer products that fit their identity and respond most strongly to message-centric tactics (e.g. Reed et al. 2012). Increasing salience without credibly showcasing commitment to a cause is unlikely to convince an ideologue to join. Worse, it may signal a lack of ideological conviction because the group is focusing resources elsewhere. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H₂: Acts of pure salience have nonpositive effects on ideologically motivated recruits.

Finally, why would lower barriers to entry pull in potential recruits? This tactic can help an extremist group that faces ambiguity. Fryer and Levitt (2012) proposes a multi-stage entry and involvement model of Ku Klux Klan recruitment. In their model, ambiguity is the recruitment bottleneck: a prospective member is aware of the Klan, but unsure of joining. Upon paying an entry fee, the individual assesses the organization's value and then decides either to continue investing time and money, remain and free ride, or leave. One way to increase initial membership is to lower the entry fee, which I refer to as a price discount. This logic follows from the idea of experience goods. Shapiro (1983) argues an experience good is something whose full value is only realized after a trial run. Lowering the initial entry cost can increase the number of first-time purchases of the experience good. If the product is high quality, then more first-time members will renew their membership. Schmalensee (1978) argues that offering a low introductory price also credibly shows the potential recruit that the leadership believes in the organization by decreasing their revenue for recruits to try the organization. Put simply, a group is so confident that new members will become returning members that they are willing to incur a short-run revenue loss (Kirmani and Rao 2000). Together, this leads to the final testable hypotheses:

H₃: Decreased barriers to entry increase the inflow of new members.

3. Background

The Oath Keepers is a far-right paramilitary organization, founded on April 19, 2009 in response to the election of Barack Obama (Southern Poverty Law Center 2022). It focuses on recruiting former first responders and veterans, although anyone who can pay membership dues can join. The organization rose to prominence within the far-right community, reporting 35,000² dues-paying members and being involved in the January 6 insurrection at the United States Capitol. The Anti-Defamation League (2022) had identified 81 individuals currently holding or running for public office in 2022, 373 law enforcement employees and 117 individuals currently serving in the U.S. military who are included in the Oath Keepers membership database. It has been described as *“...exemplify[ing] a style of American politics that views violence as a legitimate means to achieve political goals, at least under certain conditions”* (Jackson 2020) and *“...loosely structured, lack[s] a rigid ideological focus, and [is] united by things [it] opposes...rather than any central tenet”* (Valasik and Reid 2021).

The Oath Keepers’ first major event occurred in April 2014 when members traveled to Bundy Ranch in Bunkerville, Nevada to support Clive Bundy in his conflict with the Bureau of Land Management (Jackson 2020). The Oath Keepers participated in two additional armed disputes with federal law enforcement similar to Bundy Ranch. The organization became more active after the election of Donald Trump, openly supporting him (Weil 2022) and serving as security forces for other far-right extremist groups and political candidates (Cheney 2022).

The group’s activities climaxed with their instrumental role in the insurrection at the United States Capital on January 6. This led to the United States House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the Capital holding a session focusing on the Oath Keepers.³ Rhodes and other Oath Keepers have since been convicted of seditious conspiracy related to their involvement with the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the United States Capitol. The court determined Rhodes’ conduct to be domestic terrorism and sentenced him to 18 years in prison (Department of Justice 2023b).

² While the Oath Keepers reported 35,000 individuals on their roster, independent estimates suggest that it never had more than 5,000 active members at a single point in time (Jackson 2020).

³ A transcript of the hearing can be found at <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/12/1111123258/jan-6-committee-hearing-transcript>.

Testimonies by former members and employees of the Oath Keepers suggest that the national organization was profit motivated (Levine 2022).⁴ Dakota Rhodes, the son of Stewart Rhodes, recalled in an interview that *“Everything ran on donations. Sometimes [Stewart Rhodes, the founder/leader of the Oath Keepers, would] be on the phone saying, ‘Oh, well I need money. We need to create an emergency.’ And so they’d find something. That’s why they started doing disaster relief”* (Wilson 2022).

Jason Van Tatenhove, former spokesperson of the Oath Keepers, wrote in his opening statement before Congress that *“While this may come as a surprise to some, many of the true motivations of this group revolve around raising funds and not the propaganda they push.”* (Tatenhove 2023, 189). In addition to charging a membership fee, the organization solicited donations and sold merchandise. All three revenue sources hinged on successfully recruiting new members.

4. Data

Data for the main analysis comes from the leaked internal membership roster and Google Trends. In September of 2021, the Oath Keepers’ membership records and communications were made available to academics through *DDOSecrets*, a journalist 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on publishing leaked data (“Distributed Denial of Secrets”). Each row of the roster contains an individual’s Oath Keepers membership ID, membership type, name, physical and email address, and join date.⁵

In total, there are 37,976 rows in the pre-processed database. Everyone in the database paid dues at least once (ADL 2022). However, the Oath Keepers’ membership roster does not include recurring payments, which means an individual’s tenure in the organization cannot be studied. Therefore, all the following results pertain to the effect of discounts on the *inflow* of new members, not retention.

The leaked documents also include all messages on an internal forum. Based on forum posts, the recording system for the Oath Keepers was formalized around 2013. In addition, the Oath Keepers reported updating their site in November 2018, which caused significant back-end issues, such as members not receiving their welcome packages, having trouble accessing online sources, and recording errors in their

⁴ The national organization claimed to be organized as a nonprofit, although they never received the nonprofit status. Source: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers>.

⁵ The columns are not labeled. While columns such as name and address are obvious, the join date column was identified by comparing the date individuals said they joined in the forum to the recorded date in the roster. Specifically, I use `aggregate_members.csv` to create the inflow data. I identify column M as the join date.

database. To ensure that the findings aren't driven by recording issues, I limit my analysis to the period between January 1, 2013 and November 1, 2018. Forty-eight memberships do not have a join date within this time frame.⁶ They are dropped from the analysis. Finally, I limit the analysis to individuals who bought an annual membership, the predominant membership type that includes 86.5 percent of all signups. Robustness tests show the findings do not change when the other types are included.

After cleaning, 20,447 people joined the Oath Keepers within the study period. Membership expanded across the whole country with 79.2 percent of counties having at least one individual sign up for the Oath Keepers during this period. Counties in the Southwest and Northwest had the largest membership. The top three most populous Oath Keepers counties measured in recruits per capita were in Idaho, Oregon, and Montana while the top three most populous Oath Keeper counties measured in total number of Oath Keepers were in Arizona and Nevada. Maps of Oath Keepers membership by county are presented in the [online appendix](#).

4.1 Selection of Tactics

I limit the tactics to Oath Keepers events that have explicit start and end dates, were national events supported by the national leadership, and follow two weeks during which no other Oath Keepers events occurred. These selection rules include most types of events the Oath Keepers organized. Notable exceptions are emergency response callout events and nonviolent gatherings, which tend to have a national call to action to initiate, but no official end dates. Details on these types of events, including the level of participation, are ambiguous due to a lack of reporting on the internal forum and by outside sources.

Table 1 reports the start dates and end dates of all the events used in this analysis.

⁶ When a member signs up to the Oath Keepers, their assigned identification number is the number of memberships sold. Using this, I am able to determine how many members with missing sign-up dates joined between 2013 and 2018. See the [online appendix](#) for more information.

Table 1. Oath Keepers Tactics

	Start Date	End Date	Notes
<i>Membership Discounts</i>			
Veteran's Day Discount	2014-11-01	2014-11-11	25 percent membership discount from \$40 to \$29.
Constitution Day Discount	2017-07-20	2017-09-17	25 percent membership discount from \$40 to \$30 and gun giveaway.
Christmas/New Years Discount	2017-12-17	2018-02-09	25 percent membership discount from \$40 to \$29.95 and gun giveaway.
Flash Discount	2018-02-27	2018-03-01	25 percent membership discount from \$40 to \$29.95 and gun giveaway.
Memorial Day Discount	2018-05-15	2018-05-23	25 percent membership discount from \$40 to \$29.95 and gun giveaway.
<i>Callouts</i>			
Bundy Ranch	2014-04-04	2014-04-27	The event takes place at Bundy Ranch in Clark County, Nevada. It begins with the first arrest and ends when the Oath Keepers left due to fears of a drone strike.
Big Sky	2015-08-06	2015-09-03	The event takes place at White Hope mine in Lincoln, Montana. It begins with the official callout video and ends when the Oath Keepers began another callout.
DefendJ20	2017-01-17	2017-01-20	The event requests individuals to travel to Washington D.C. and serve as unofficial security for the presidential inauguration. The event starts with the call to action and ends with the inauguration.
<i>Sports Sponsorship</i>			
NASCAR Sponsorship	2013-05-04	2013-07-13	Oath Keepers sponsor NASCAR driver Jeffrey Earnhardt for four races in the Xfinity Series with their logo on the hood of the car.

Membership Discounts

Annual dues cost \$40. A membership discount temporarily reduced the cost of joining by approximately 25 percent. Seven membership discounts were identified. The start and end date for each discount was first identified in the forum and corroborated on their website via the Wayback Machine.⁷ Two discounts were dropped due to having less than a two week pre-period between events.

⁷ The Wayback machine saves instances of a website at a given point in time. A directory of instances saving the Oath Keepers' main page is at: https://web.archive.org/web/20091201000000*/oathkeepers.org

Callouts

The Oath Keepers organized and participated in multiple politically motivated events, some of which were armed callouts—when the Oath Keepers organized and/or participated in armed standoffs with federal agents. From 2013-2018, the Oath Keepers were asked to participate in armed standoffs at Bundy Ranch and Big Sky by the landowners. In these events, the Oath Keepers responded positively to the request and occupied the territory.⁸ Such acts of political violence tend to be celebrated by right-wing populists, and sometimes supported by local officials (Nemerever 2019).

In addition, the Oath Keepers issued a callout, codename *DefendJ20*, to guard the inauguration of Donald Trump on January 20, 2017. There is no indication the organization was asked to do so by any local, state, or federal official. The members were instructed to “watch for jihadist terrorists” and “radical leftist groups” (Hatewatch Staff 2017). Unlike the previous callouts, the founder encouraged members to adhere to the rules of the inauguration and not bring firearms. Members are told to film incidents and report them to police unless they needed to engage in combat (Hatewatch Staff 2017). The event begins with the official callout on January 17th, 2017 and ends on the day of the inauguration.

Sports Sponsorships: NASCAR

In 2013, the Oath Keepers sponsored NASCAR driver Jeffrey Earnhardt. The Oath Keepers’ logo was prominently displayed on the hood of his car for four races beginning May 4, 2013 and ending July 13, 2013.⁹

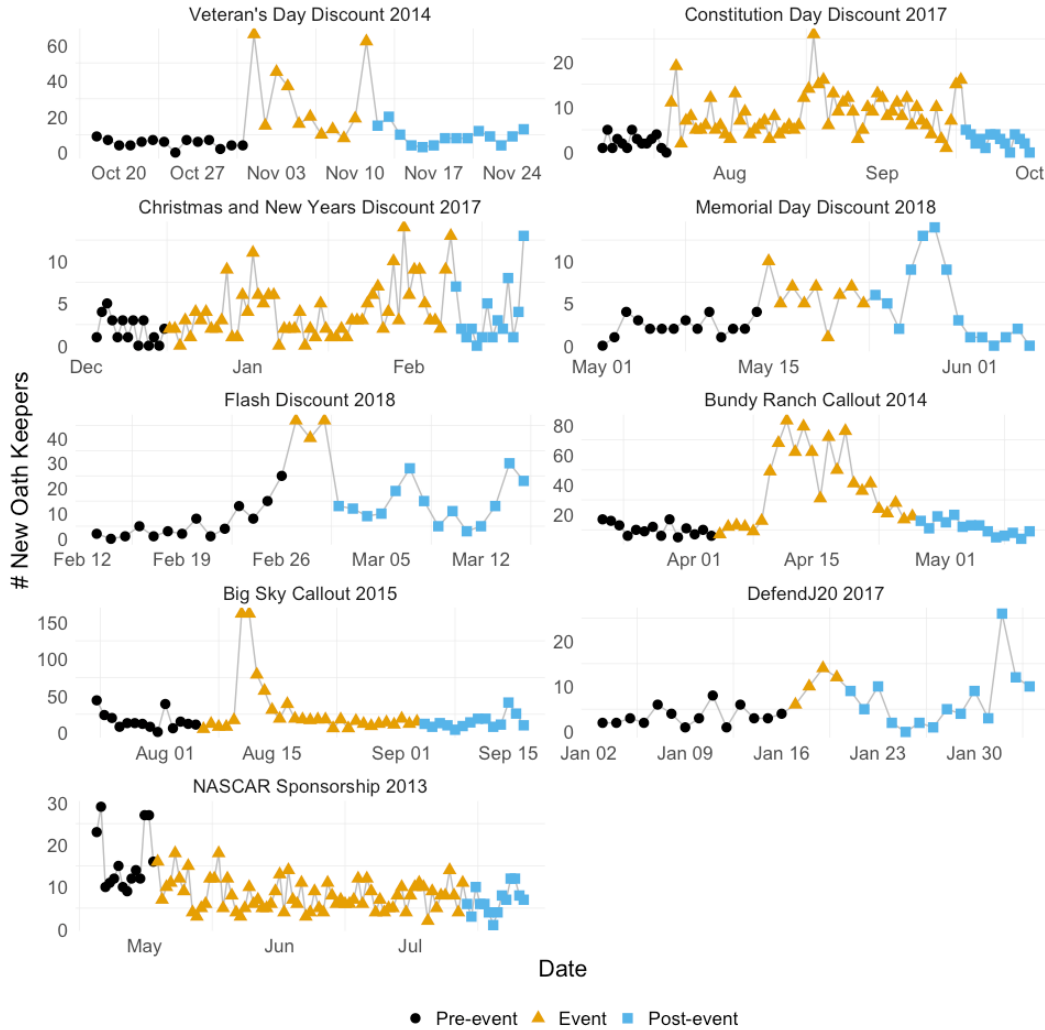
4.2 Trends in Recruitment

The variable of interest is the number of Oath Keepers signups per day. Figure 1 plots the daily inflow over two weeks before, during, and two weeks after each respective event. Duration, as detailed in Table 1, ranges from brief instances lasting merely three days to more prolonged occurrences extending across several months.

⁸ A local Oath Keepers chapter also participated in an armed standoff at Sugar Pine Mine in Josephine County, Oregon against the wishes of the national organization (Jackson 2020; Tatenhove 2023).

⁹ See <https://www.racing-reference.info/sponsor-search/>.

Figure 1. Oath Keepers Events. The graphs depict the number of new sign-ups per day. Each pre/post period is 14 days long apart from the flash discount post period. Axis scales differ.



The graphs provide two insights. First, discounts and callouts both lead to increases in the inflow of new members. The inflow of new members increases within the first few days of the discount and remains high during discounts. Additionally, the two armed callouts lead to a spike in recruitment a few days after the announcement. Second, the inflow trends downward during the NASCAR sponsorship. This trajectory continues during the two weeks after the sponsorship ends.

The observed patterns described above are confirmed to be statistically significant by comparing the average recruitment before, during, and after each tactic using an event study specification:

$$y_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 I(t \in \text{event}) + \alpha_2 I(t \in \text{after event}) + \epsilon_t$$

where y_t is the number of new Oath Keepers signups on day t , and ϵ_t is the error term. Table 2 presents the results. To account for (potential) serial correlation, Newey-West standard errors are used. The bottom row tests the hypothesis that the inflow of new members during the event is the same as the inflow after the event. The p-values are reported in the table.

Table 2. Event Study of Oath Keepers' Events

	Discounts				Callouts			Advertisement	
	Veteran's Day 2014	Constitution Day 2017	Christmas/New Years 2017	Memorial Day 2018	Flash 2018	Bundy Ranch 2014	Big Sky 2015	DefendJ20 2017	NASCAR 2013
Intercept	5.21*** (0.55)	2.36*** (0.27)	1.93*** (0.46)	2.29*** (0.28)	6.3** (2.5)	10.4*** (1.1)	16.1*** (3.2)	3.43*** (0.37)	16.2*** (2.2)
I(Event)	23.1*** (6.6)	6.13*** (0.85)	2.16*** (0.74)	3.60*** (0.67)	38.4*** (2.6)	28.3*** (7.7)	12.8 (11.1)	7.1*** (1.5)	-8.2*** (2.3)
I(Post-Event)	3.9** (1.7)	0.29 (0.44)	1.6 (1.1)	2.4 (1.9)	7.7** (3.7)	1.1 (2.2)	-1.6 (4.2)	3.6 (2.2)	-9.5*** (2.5)
Num.Obs.	39	88	83	37	31	52	57	32	99
Std.Errors	Newey-West (L=2)	Newey-West (L=3)	Newey-West (L=3)	Newey-West (L=2)	Newey-West (L=2)	Newey-West (L=2)	Newey-West (L=2)	Newey-West (L=2)	Newey-West (L=3)
Pr(I(Event)=I(Post-Event))	<.01	<.01	0.64	0.56	<.01	<.01	0.19	0.18	0.29

Note: * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Event studies are run separately using two weeks before the start of an event and two weeks after the end of an event as pre and post periods. The intercept is the average number of Oath Keepers signups per day in the two weeks leading up to the event. $Pr(I(Event)=I(Post-Event))$ tests if the average inflow of new members during an event differs from the average inflow of new members in the two weeks following an event. Additional specifications, including time trends, are provided in the appendix.

All discounts lead to an increase in the average number of new members during the discounts. There is evidence of a persistent increase in the inflow of new members during the Veteran's Day and Flash discounts, but the effects are substantially smaller than during the event. Similarly, there is evidence of an effect during the callouts. The effect during Big Sky is large, though imprecisely measured, while the effect of Bundy Ranch and DefendJ20 are both large and precisely estimated. There is little evidence of

a persistent effect after the callouts. Finally, the NASCAR sponsorship suggests a drop in membership during the campaign that persisted after the sponsorship ended.

The event study results may be interpreted as causal if the model is properly specified. However, there are concerns about omitted variable bias, such as changes in consumer tastes, that could be driving the findings. Section 5 presents an identification strategy to address these concerns by constructing a counterfactual made up of online search trends for similar organizations. The findings presented in Section 6 will corroborate, as estimated effects are similar in magnitude and significance to those reported in Table 2.

4.3 Control Groups

The econometric specification presented in Section 5 relies on creating a counterfactual from organizations like the Oath Keepers. I use three sources of information to identify these groups. The first is the *Center for International Security and Cooperation's Global Right-Wing Extremism Map* (International Security and Cooperation 2022), which maps how far right extremist groups are related to one another. The second is the Southern Poverty Law Center's yearly summary of active patriot groups in the United States. I limit the sample to organizations that have a similar presence to the Oath Keepers across the country. Finally, similar groups are also found using the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) report on right-wing militia groups in the United States (Raleigh, Stall, and Kishi 2020). The report identifies nine large, cross-state right wing militia groups that are "similar" to the Oath Keepers.

Membership data is unfortunately unavailable for these groups, a common issue faced by researchers in this field. I instead use Google Trends, a measure of general interest, of these comparable groups to construct a counterfactual. Google Trends was pulled separately for each group for each event on May 14, 2023 with the time frame beginning four weeks before the start of the event and ending two weeks after the conclusion of the event.

Table 3 shows the organizations used to construct the counterfactual in each tactic. An "X" signifies if the organization is included in the estimation for that specific event, in which case I term them a "donor". Some organizations aren't used as donors in all the counterfactual estimates because the organization may not have been founded yet or may have significantly shrunk by the event. For example, the Proud Boys was founded in 2017, so it is only available as a donor for five of the nine events.

The John Birch Society is an antigovernment movement that first started in the 1950s known for spreading conspiracy theories (Southern Poverty Law Center 2021). The Eagle Forum and We Are Change are also listed as antigovernment movements (Southern Poverty Law Center), while the Three Percenters is another militia group that International Security and Cooperation (2022) reports as an ally to the Oath Keepers.

The Proud Boys is described as “a nation-wide right-wing street movement” (Raleigh, Stall, and Kishi 2020). The leader of the Proud Boys and four other members were indicted for seditious conspiracy related to their involvement at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, with four being convicted (Department of Justice 2023a). Finally, Patriot Prayer, the Three Percenters, and the Oath Keepers are classified as “mainstream militias” by Raleigh, Stall, and Kishi (2020), meaning that they are “large, cross-state right wing militia movements.”¹⁰

Table 3. Donor Pool Per Tactic

	Three Percenters	John Birch Society	Eagle Forum	We Are Change	Proud Boys	Patriot Prayer
<i>Membership Discounts</i>						
Veteran's Day Discount 2014	X	X	X	X		
Constitution Day Discount 2017	X	X	X		X	X
Christmas and New Years Discount 2017	X	X	X		X	X
Memorial Day Discount 2018	X	X			X	X
Flash Discount 2018	X	X			X	X
<i>Callouts</i>						
Bundy Ranch Callout 2014	X	X	X	X		
Big Sky Callout 2015	X	X	X	X		
DefendJ20 2017	X	X	X		X	X
<i>Sports Sponsorship</i>						
NASCAR Sponsorship 2013	X	X	X	X		

Note: The organizations used to construct a counterfactual for each event. Data used in this analysis is from Google Trends. All Google Trends are exported independently. An X signifies that an organization is included in the donor pool for the event. Organizations are omitted if they were not yet created or stopped operating at previous levels.

4.4 County Characteristics

Section 7 studies the interaction between push and pull factors over five county level characteristics: two measures of economic inequality and three demographic characteristics. Economic inequality is measured using median income and an income inequality metric—the ratio of the mean income for the highest quintile divided by the mean income for the lowest quintile for each county. Both metrics come from the FRED database. Demographic characteristics include the percentage of a county’s constituency that voted Republican/Libertarian, from the MIT Election Lab (MIT Election Data And Science Lab 2018), the percentage of a county’s residents that identify as white, from the American Community Survey, and the percentage of the population that lives in a rural area, gathered from the 2010 Census. Finally, population estimates come from the Census Bureau.

¹⁰ The SPLC also includes the American Contingency, Light Foot Militia and Civilian Defense Forces in their list (Southern Poverty Law Center). The American Contingency was founded in 2020, after the last tactic studied. Light Foot Militia and Civilian Defense Forces are omitted due to a lack of information on the groups’ founding dates.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic and Economic Indicators by County

	Discounts					Callouts			Sports Sponsorship
	Veteran's Day 2014	Constitution Day 2017	Christmas/New Years 2017	Memorial Day 2018	Flash 2018	Bundy Ranch 2014	Big Sky 2015	DefendJ20 2017	NASCAR 2013
<i>Panel A: Economic inequality</i>									
Lower Quartile Mean	9.81	10.01	10.01	10.02	10.02	9.81	9.94	10.01	9.63
Upper Quartile Mean	17.45	18.38	18.38	18.64	18.64	17.45	17.88	18.38	17.17
Difference	7.63*** (0.13)	8.37*** (0.18)	8.37*** (0.18)	8.62*** (0.21)	8.62*** (0.21)	7.63*** (0.13)	7.94*** (0.15)	8.37*** (0.18)	7.54*** (0.13)
<i>Panel B: Median household income (USD)</i>									
Lower Quartile Mean	\$34,421.72	\$37,228.23	\$37,228.23	\$38,532.97	\$38,532.97	\$34,421.72	\$35,652.06	\$37,228.23	\$33,875.55
Upper Quartile Mean	\$63,095.97	\$68,982.19	\$68,982.19	\$71,147.76	\$71,147.76	\$63,095.97	\$64,915.41	\$68,982.19	\$61,415.06
Difference	\$28,674.25*** (\$414.65)	\$31,753.96*** (\$475.26)	\$31,753.96*** (\$475.26)	\$32,614.79*** (\$489.11)	\$32,614.79*** (\$489.11)	\$28,674.25*** (\$414.65)	\$29,263.35*** (\$423.66)	\$31,753.96*** (\$475.26)	\$27,539.51*** (\$400.87)
<i>Panel C: Percent voted Republican/Libertarian in last presidential election</i>									
Lower Quartile Mean	39.59	41.19	41.19	41.19	41.19	39.59	39.59	41.19	39.59
Upper Quartile Mean	77.25	80.29	80.29	80.29	80.29	77.25	77.25	80.29	77.25
Difference	37.65*** (0.37)	39.1*** (0.4)	39.1*** (0.4)	39.1*** (0.4)	39.1*** (0.4)	37.65*** (0.37)	37.65*** (0.37)	39.1*** (0.4)	37.65*** (0.37)
<i>Panel D: Percent rural</i>									
Lower Quartile Mean	16.4	16.4	16.4	16.4	16.4	16.4	16.4	16.4	16.4
Upper Quartile Mean	99.17	99.17	99.17	99.17	99.17	99.17	99.17	99.17	99.17
Difference	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)	82.77*** (0.38)
<i>Panel E: Percent white</i>									
Lower Quartile Mean	59.6	59	59	58.79	58.79	59.6	59.59	59	59.75
Upper Quartile Mean	97.13	96.85	96.85	96.74	96.74	97.13	97.01	96.85	97.25
Difference	37.53*** (0.55)	37.85*** (0.54)	37.85*** (0.54)	37.95*** (0.54)	37.95*** (0.54)	37.53*** (0.55)	37.41*** (0.53)	37.85*** (0.54)	37.5*** (0.55)

Note: * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. All summary statistics are at the county-event level. Median household income is in USD for the given year. Economic inequality is measured as the average top quintile of income for a county divided by the average bottom quintile of income for a county. Percent voted Republican/Libertarian refers to the percent of a county that voted for either party in the most previous presidential election. Percent rural refers to the percent of a county's population that lives in a rural area. Lower Quantile Mean is the average value of counties in the bottom quartile based on the specified characteristic. Similarly, Upper Quantile Mean is the average value of counties in the upper quartile based on the specified characteristic. Standard error is provided below the difference.

Table 4 summarizes the characteristics during each tactic. Each panel presents the average value among counties in the lowest quartile of the distribution and the highest.¹¹ Across all events and all characteristics, the difference between the bottom and top quartiles is statistically significant. Additional information on the relationship between Oath Keepers recruitment and county level determinants is presented in the appendix.

¹¹ E.g., during the Veterans Day Discount of 2014, the ratio of the top quintile of income to the bottom quintile was 9.81, on average, in the least unequal quartile of counties.

5. Econometric Specification

5.1 Setup

A simple before/after analysis cannot address possible biases due to the extremist movement's popularity that coincides with tactics. These omitted variables, if present and unaccounted for, could bias the findings in any direction and magnitude. I account for that potential omitted variable bias by using a synthetic control-like framework. As in synthetic control, a counterfactual is created for Oath Keepers' new members using untreated times series. In contrast, the control units are observed in a different unit of analysis than the organization of interest.

The causal effect on new Oath Keepers membership of an event at time t can be represented as:

$$\tau_t = y_t(1) - y_t(0)$$

where $y_t(1)$ is the number of new members joining the Oath Keepers, had an event occurred, and $y_t(0)$ is the number of new members in the absence of the event. Suppose an event occurs at time T . Then the researcher observes

$$y_t = I(t > T)y_t(1) + I(t < T)y_t(0)$$

The goal is to estimate $y_t(0)$ as a function of time series correlated with membership but independent of tactics, to generate a counterfactual: $y_t(0) = f(\mathbf{g}_t)$ where $\mathbf{g}_t = [g_{1,t}, \dots, g_{N,t}]$ are the Google Trends for similar organizations. $g_{j,t}$ is the Google Trends value for group j at time t while \mathbf{g}_t is the vector of Google Trends data for all groups in the donor pool at time t . The trends capture changes in the overall popularity of similar organizations while being unaffected by the Oath Keepers' events.

I estimate the counterfactual for each event independently. My preferred estimation procedure uses the Brodersen et al. (2015) approach, which builds off Bayesian Structural Time Series (Scott and Varian 2013). Theoretically, this approach is optimal for my setting because it does not rely on asymptotic results, a major benefit with a short pre-treatment period, and was designed to identify the causal effects of marketing campaigns using Google Trends data. Empirically, I show in Section 6.1 that this method approximates the data generating process better than other commonly used synthetic control estimation strategies.

I assume the following state space framework:

$$y_v(\mathbf{g}_t) = \beta_{0,t} + \sum_{j=1}^N \beta_j g_{j,t} + \epsilon_t \quad \epsilon_t \sim N(0, \sigma_\epsilon^2)$$

$$\beta_{0,t} = \beta_{0,t-1} + \eta_t \quad \eta_t \sim N(0, \sigma_\eta^2)$$

where $\mathbf{v} = [\beta_1, \dots, \beta_N, \sigma_\epsilon^2, \sigma_\eta^2]$ are parameters. I include a local-level trend for the intercept.¹² The intercept captures the general recruitment level, allowing for the use of control measured in different units than the outcome.

The method shares the basic intuition as Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller (2014): impute a counterfactual using a variant of regularized least squares. Brodersen et al. (2015) does so by utilizing the Bayesian shrinkage prior slab and spike. This prior allows for each coefficient parameter to have an “inclusion” distribution and an “intensity” distribution represented by the product of a Bernoulli and normal distribution. The approach induces sparsity in the coefficients, like Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller (2014), but without requiring the treated unit to be within the convex hull, nor the coefficients to be positive and sum to one. In a standard synthetic control setting, where the control and outcome time series are measured in the same units, weights outside of the zero to one interval may be viewed as problematic because the estimator is relying on extrapolation. Allowing the weights to be greater than one or less than zero in this setting is both necessary and beneficial because the outcome time series and the controls are measured in different units, so imposing a convex hull is inappropriate.

Following Brodersen et al. (2015), let $\beta = \{\beta_1, \dots, \beta_N\}$ be the set of coefficients and $v = \{v_1, \dots, v_N\}$ be the inclusion parameters, where $v_j = 1$ if $\beta_j \neq 0$ and $v_j = 0$ otherwise. Furthermore, define β_v as the nonzero elements of β , and let Σ_v^{-1} be the rows and columns of Σ^{-1} that correspond to the nonzero elements of v . Then, the slab and spike prior is formulated as:

$$\Pr\left(v, \beta, \frac{1}{\sigma_\epsilon^2}\right) = \Pr(\beta_v | v, \sigma_\epsilon^2) \Pr(\sigma_\epsilon^2 | v) \Pr(v)$$

The spike (i.e., inclusion) portion of the prior is modeled as the product of independent Bernoulli distributions:

$$\prod_{j=1}^N \pi_j^{v_j} (1 - \pi_j)^{1-v_j}$$

¹² Brodersen et al. (2015) advocate for this specification in their accompanying R package, although the paper focuses on more complex trend specifications.

I set $\pi_j = .6$ for all j , which corresponds to just over half the predictors being included on average. The slab (i.e., intensity) portion follows the conjugate normal-inverse gamma distribution:

$$\beta_v | \sigma_\epsilon^2 \sim N(\mathbb{b}_v, \sigma_\epsilon^2 (\Sigma_v^{-1})^{-1})$$

$$\frac{1}{\sigma_\epsilon^2} \sim \Gamma(.5, .1 \frac{1}{T-1} \sum_{t < T} (y_t - \bar{y}_t)^2)$$

The hyperparameters for σ_ϵ^2 are chosen based on the expected R^2 following Brodersen et al. (2015). I set the hyperparameter values, \mathbb{b}_v , to Σ^{-1} is the average between Zellner’s g-prior and the diagonal elements. Formally, if G is the design matrix, then $\Sigma^{-1} = \frac{1}{T} (.5G^tG + .5diag(G^tG))$. This accounts for the scaling of the control units, like the common practice of standardizing features in machine learning. Finally, σ_η^2 is set to a default value of 0.01, a common hyperparameter choice for well-behaved times series such as aggregate sales.¹³

Creating the counterfactual consists of three steps. In the first, the posterior distribution of the parameters is estimated via Gibbs sampling. The number of iterations is set to 20,000 with 1,000 burn-in iterations. After the burn-in, each draw from the Gibbs sampler is used to predict the missing potential outcome in the post-treatment periods. In the final step, the difference between observed and predicted values is recorded. Each step of the Gibbs sampler creates an estimated treatment effect.

5.2 Identifying Assumptions

When constructing a counterfactual in this framework, one must balance between choosing a long enough pre-treatment to estimate the parameters, but not so long that the plausibility of the data generating process comes into question. Concerns include the relationship between the treated and explanatory time series varying over time, political activity outside the data generating process that could cause structural breaks in the time series, or unobserved changes in regional/national Oath Keepers activity.¹⁴ To mitigate these concerns, I limit my window to two weeks before and after each tactic. After surveying the days surrounding the tactics, I failed to identify major political activity or additional Oath Keepers events occurring two weeks before each tactic. I relax this restriction in Section 6.1, as a robustness check.

¹³ The results are robust to setting $\sigma_\eta^2 = 0.1$.

¹⁴ For example, the Oath Keepers performed a different national event 16 days before the Big Sky armed standoff.

Identification in this framework requires the proposed data generating process to be a “good” fit. I investigate this claim by artificially moving the treatment date forward into the pre-treatment window and compare the estimated treatment effect to zero, the true treatment effect in the placebo period. If the counterfactual closely tracks the true recruitment inflow in the placebo period, then there is strong evidence the method is accurately approximating the underlying data generating process. The estimated treatment effects can then be interpreted as causal.

Figure 2 artificially moves the date of treatment forward seven days.¹⁵ Seven days are used to fit the counterfactual model and seven days to test it. The grey line with dots is the raw data while the line without dots is the constructed counterfactual with 95 percent credibility intervals.¹⁶ The vertical dashed line marks the beginning of the placebo test (seven days before treatment).

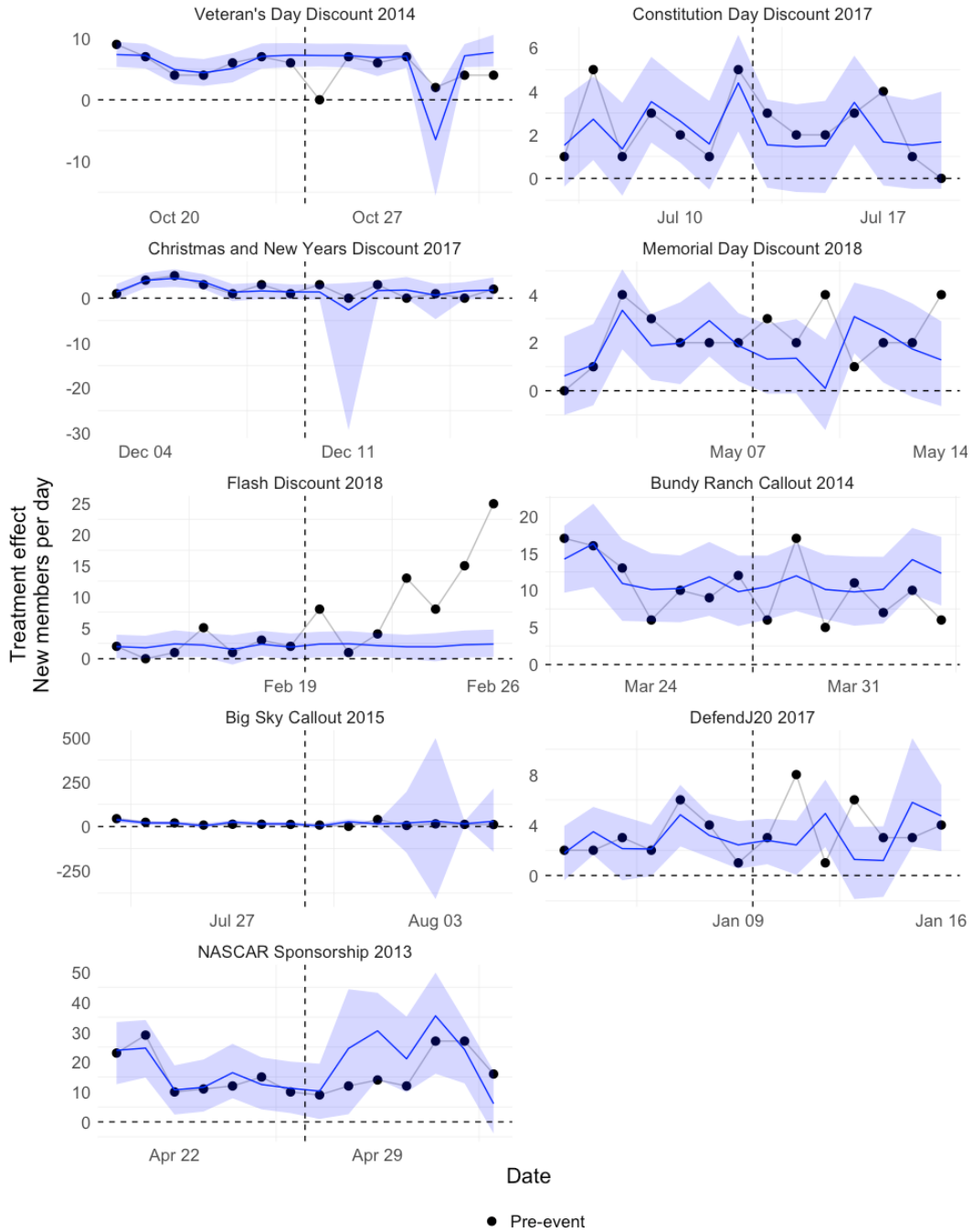
These results suggest that the estimation approach accurately captures the latent factors of Oath Keepers membership for most tactics. The counterfactual (blue line) closely follows the trend in the data (black dots), with most of the data in the credibility intervals. However, there is a noticeable divergence between the counterfactual and true data preceding the Flash Discount, evidence of omitted variable bias. Therefore, the estimated treatment effects for all tactics, except the Flash Discount, can be interpreted as causal.

Finally, the large credibility intervals on the placebo effect for the Big Sky callout are driven by one day in which We Are Change received unusually high website traffic. When that day is removed, the placebo closely follows the observed data with more reasonable credibility intervals. Joint tests of significance for the placebo periods, presented in the [online appendix](#), confirm these conclusions.

¹⁵ Using half of the pre-treatment periods to conduct a placebo-in-time follows from the analysis performed in Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller (2014).

¹⁶ The 95 percent credibility interval is the range of parameters that account for 95 percent of the posterior distribution.

Figure 2. Placebo test of Oath Keepers discounts on new membership. The dashed lines show the beginning of the placebo period. Window limited to pre-discount. The blue line is the constructed counterfactual with 95 percent credibility intervals.



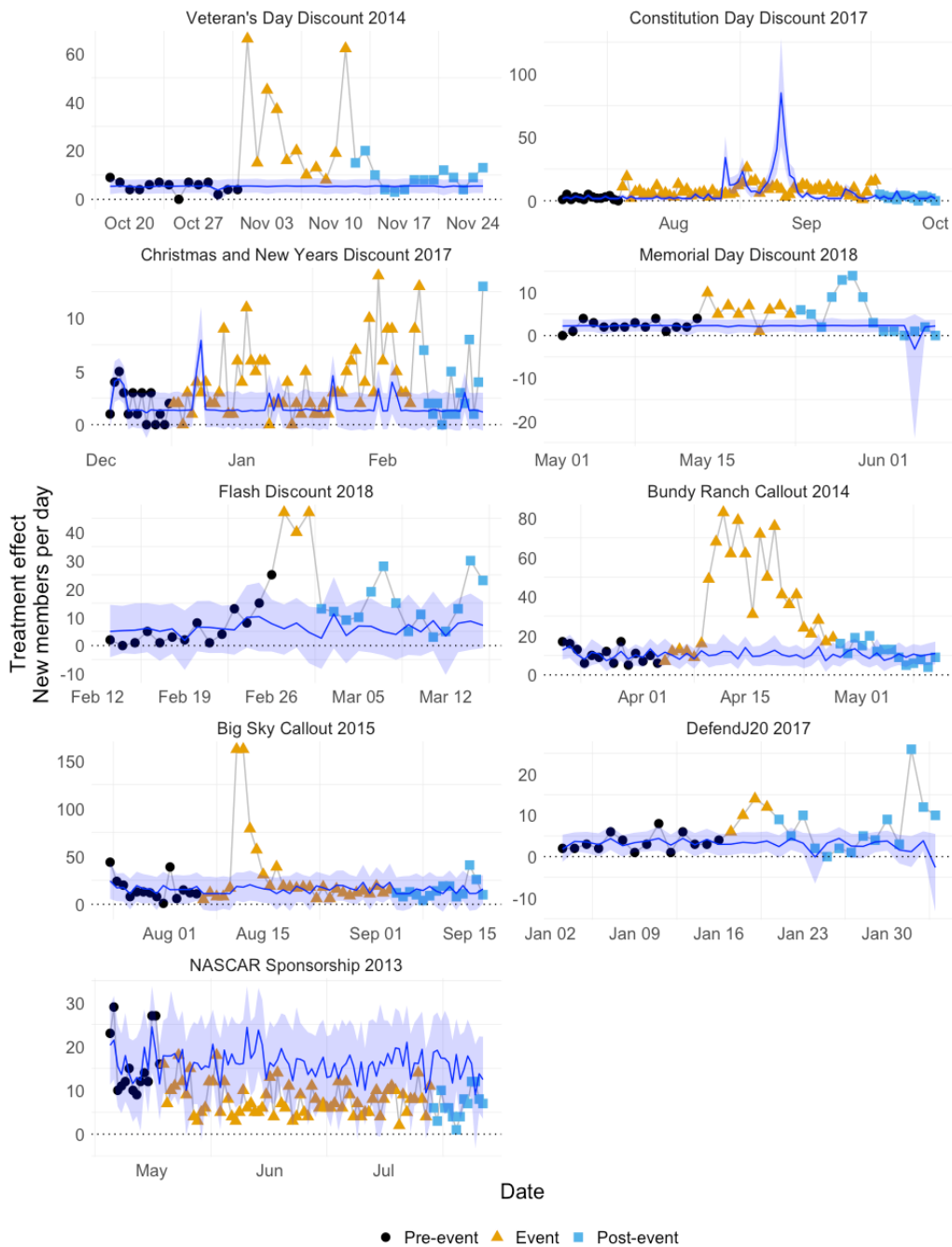
There are two concerns about the relevance of the control units: Google Trends data may be unrelated to changes in the popularity of the militia movement, and the other organizations' trends might not well approximate the Oath Keepers recruitment data. To address point one, I compare the correlation between the Oath Keepers' daily recruitment and Google Trends for the term "Oath Keepers" during the tactics. I find that the correlation is 0.35 pooled across all tactics, suggesting that a strong relationship exists between the two metrics.¹⁷ Second, the other organizations may not be related to Oath Keepers recruitment. If the Google Trends data were not contributing to the control units, then the counterfactual estimate would collapse to a local-level state space model. A plot of the inclusion probability and coefficient values is presented in the appendix, which suggests that the Google Trends contribute towards the counterfactual with meaningful coefficient values.

6. Results

Figure 3 plots the Oath Keepers' membership and the constructed counterfactual. As in Figure 2, the grey line with points is the raw Oath Keepers' membership inflow data. The circles are days before the event, the triangles during the event, and the squares after. The solid pointless line is the constructed counterfactual with the shaded area showing 95 percent credibility intervals. A yellow triangle (or blue square) outside the shaded area indicates a statistically significant effect, at the 95 percent level, on that day.

¹⁷ See the [online appendix](#) for a further breakdown on the correlation between the Oath Keepers' Google Trends and membership inflows.

Figure 3. Effect of Oath Keepers Tactics on New Membership. The blue line is the constructed counterfactual with 95 percent credibility intervals. Axis scales differ.



The average number of individuals signing up for the Oath Keepers increases during all tactics, except for the NASCAR advertisement. Although recruitment is in general higher during these periods, there are sporadic days of lower or similar membership. The counterfactual spike during the Constitution Day discount is most likely driven by the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia from August 11 - August 12, 2017.

Table 5 shows the average effect of tactics on the inflow of new members during each tactic. Results are presented in three ways: the percent increase in recruits due to the tactic, the average increase per day during the duration of the tactic, and the total increase in new members attributed to the tactic. Excluding the Flash discount and Constitution Day discount, the Oath Keepers recruited an additional 412.56 annual members due to all the discounts, which equates to an additional \$11,141 from initial signups. Similarly, the callout events led to an additional 1,080 annual members, or \$43,189 additional revenue from initial signups. The NASCAR advertisement campaign caused an average decrease of about eight members per day, effectively balancing out the gains in membership from discounts.¹⁸

Table 5. Effect of Tactics on Oath Keepers' Recruitment

	Relative Effect (%)	Average Effect	Cumulative Effect
<i>Membership Discounts</i>			
Veteran's Day Discount 2014	429.61 [331.45, 563.14]	22.88 [21.72, 24.01]	251.65 [238.92, 264.1]
Constitution Day Discount 2017	3.77 [-29.41, 59.46]	-0.14 [-3.53, 3.16]	-8.5 [-212.02, 189.8]
Christmas and New Years Discount 2017	138.19 [81.29, 232.09]	2.33 [1.83, 2.86]	128.32 [100.89, 157.25]
Memorial Day Discount 2018	166.82 [107.92, 262.8]	3.62 [3.06, 4.27]	32.59 [27.51, 38.39]
Flash Discount 2018	1057.19 [252.77, 4447.13]	38.47 [32.86, 44.02]	115.42 [98.59, 132.07]
<i>Callouts</i>			
Bundy Ranch Callout 2014	274.44 [207.68, 366.81]	28.21 [26.1, 30.38]	677.1 [626.39, 729.2]
Big Sky Callout 2015	85.3 [38.92, 151.5]	12.9 [8.11, 17.43]	374.14 [235.05, 505.4]
DefendJ20 2017	228.25 [119.05, 440.32]	7.12 [5.71, 8.56]	28.48 [22.83, 34.23]
<i>Sports Sponsorship</i>			
NASCAR Sponsorship 2013	-49.65 [-59.38, -36.19]	-8.11 [-11.69, -4.54]	-576.13 [-830.32, -322.14]

Note: The relative effect is in terms of percent change. The average effect is the average number of new Oath Keepers per day due to the discount during the discount while the cumulative effect is the total number of new Oath Keepers due to the discount during the discount. Brackets are 95 percent credibility intervals. The placebo test for the Flash discount suggests the estimated counterfactual did not accurately approximate the underlying data generating process. The results for the Flash discount should be interpreted as suggested, not causal.

¹⁸ The Oath Keepers experienced unusually high levels of recruitment for four days leading up to the NASCAR sponsorship. As a robustness check, I omit those days when constructing the counterfactual and reestimate the treatment effect. I find a statistically significant negative effect, although half the magnitude.

Callouts increasing recruitment and sports sponsorship decreasing it substantiates hypotheses one and two. The callout events' large recruitment successes suggest that potential recruits respond strongly toward credible signals of ideology. If potential members value being in organizations that embody certain ideologies, then callouts can further publicize them. This is why armed government standoffs are successful in recruiting new members during the events. In contrast, sponsoring a NASCAR driver does not emphasize an organization's ideology. Rather, it is most successful in increasing name recognition, potentially normalizing the organization to a larger consumer base. The NASCAR sponsorship's lackluster effect suggests that purely salient acts dissuade parts of the preexisting pool of potential recruits from accession. This is further supported by callout events pulling in more new members than discounts and the sports sponsorship.

Finally, the discount effects strongly substantiate hypothesis 3. The most striking feature of these findings is not the sign, but the magnitude. The Oath Keepers appear to be catering towards a highly price sensitive consumer base. The percent change in recruitment inflows far exceeds the price drop. However, this sensitivity decreased over time. Discount effects were largest during the Veteran's Day discount in 2014, becoming smaller in both relative and absolute terms in the following years.

Discounts and callouts becoming less effective at pulling in new members aligns with anonymity and ambiguity affecting early recruitment efforts. As the organization became better known with an established reputation, potential recruits were more confident in the membership's value and their "fit" in the organization. This shrunk the pool of ill-informed potential members to the Oath Keepers, causing credible acts of ideology and decreased barriers to entry to entice fewer recruits.

6.1 Robustness Tests

Pre-treatment length

My preferred specification limits the pre-treatment to two weeks to mitigate the risk of contamination in the construction of the counterfactual. Specifically, two weeks ensures there are no other Oath Keepers national events nor major political announcements occurring during the pre-treatment window. For example, there appears to be a structural break in this inflow rate of new Oath Keepers four weeks before the Memorial Day discount¹⁹, and a different callout event occurred 16 days before the Big Sky callout. As a robustness check, I extend the pre-treatment window to three and four weeks to investigate the sensitivity of the results. A table of treatment effects is provided in the [online appendix](#).

¹⁹ See the [online appendix](#) for the graph.

The increased pre-treatment period suggests that the Constitution Day discount did lead to a positive significant increase in new membership, but is masked by the Unite the Right rally. The treatment effect for the Constitution Day discount, using only the days leading up to the Unite the Right rally, is on average 4.5 new members per day. The increased pre-treatment period had little to no effect on all other tactics.

Alternative estimation strategies

The preferred estimation strategy is relatively unique in the economics literature, which is fitting for the unique data constraints faced in this setting. I investigate the robustness of the findings to alternative estimation methods by performing a horse race between Brodersen et al. (2015) and common synthetic control variants found in the literature. While not designed with this setting in mind, the alternative methods familiar to economists may still better approximate the data generating process.

I compare the estimated effects on recruitment to the following alternative synthetic control estimation strategies: Ferman and Pinto (2021), Carvalho, Masini, and Medeiros (2018), Xu (2017), Klinenberg (2022), and Ben-Michael, Feller, and Rothstein (2019). Ferman and Pinto (2021) includes an intercept while still restricting the weights to be nonnegative and sum to one. Ben-Michael, Feller, and Rothstein (2019) performs a bias correction to achieve better approximations to the DGP. Carvalho, Masini, and Medeiros (2018) and Xu (2017) both create a counterfactual of treated units to estimate the treatment effect with inference derived from asymptotic results, not prior distributions. Finally, Klinenberg (2022) builds off Brodersen et al. (2015) by allowing for time varying parameters in a non-centered state space framework.

I compare the models based on mean squared forecast error using the following placebo specification: I fit the models on days 8-14 before treatment, then compare the mean squared forecast error for days one to seven.

Table 6. Mean Squared Forecast Error of Alternative Models Using the First Seven Days Before a Tactic

	Main Specification	Ferman and Pinto (2021)	Ben Michael et al. (2019)	Carvalho et al. (2018)	Xu (2017)	Klinenberg (2022)
<i>Membership Discounts</i>						
Veteran's Day Discount 2014	21.1	1393.9	1461.77	9.4	775.2	17.1
Constitution Day Discount 2017	1.6	3.4	3.38	1.7	24.9	3.6
Christmas and New Years Discount 2017	2.5	866.3	901.24	2.8	80.0	3.6
Memorial Day Discount 2018	4.3	7.4	7.69	1.4	7.9	6.7
Flash Discount 2018	124.5	91.3	91.82	128.0	83.1	81.5
<i>Callouts</i>						
Bundy Ranch Callout 2014	20.0	153.4	151.78	24.3	226.6	77.8
Big Sky Callout 2015	287.7	738.9	966.48	165.0	1778.6	191.0
DefendJ20 2017	11.5	94.9	83.19	5.9	71.2	19.0
<i>Sports Sponsorship</i>						
NASCAR Sponsorship 2013	98.5	756.7	799.07	92.2	1385.7	160.2

Note: A "horse race" of multiple methods. Each method was fitted 8-14 days before an event, then used to create a counterfactual 1-7 days before the event. The mean squared forecast error is presented for the 1-7 day placebo window. See the appendix for results fitting the models on weeks 2-3 and weeks 2-4.

Table 6 presents the mean squared forecast error for the seven days leading up to a tactic. The main specification and Carvalho, Masini, and Medeiros (2018) have the smallest mean squared forecast errors and tend to be similar to one another. Ferman and Pinto (2021), Ben-Michael, Feller, and Rothstein (2019) and Xu (2017) have a large forecast error in comparison to the other models. Klinenberg (2022) creating estimates with similar MSFE as the preferred specification suggests that the additional flexibility of the model will lead to more model uncertainty, as seen in wider credibility intervals, with negligible reductions in bias. Together, this exercise provides empirical evidence in favor of estimating the counterfactual using Brodersen et al. (2015).

I further investigate the sensitivity of the findings by rerunning the analysis using the Carvalho, Masini, and Medeiros (2018) estimating strategy, the only approach to rival the main specification's small MSFE. The estimates magnitudes and statistical significance are like the main specification across all events, showing that the results are robust to either estimation strategy.²⁰

²⁰ See the appendix for further details on Klinenberg (2022), and the [online appendix](#) for additional information on the Carvalho, Masini, and Medeiros (2018) estimates.

Endogeneity of tactics

Another concern may be that discounts occur during already popular membership recruitment periods, callout events are strategically planned around seasonal trends, or NASCAR happens to occur during a time when individuals have a lower propensity for membership. I investigate these concerns by rerunning the synthetic control estimation for all tactics between 2013 and 2018. A counterfactual for Veteran’s Day discount, Constitution Day discount, and Big Sky callout in 2018 cannot be calculated because no new Oath Keepers joined in the pre-treatment period.

Table 7 displays the estimated treatment effects for the placebo years. In general, estimated treatment effects are small and insignificant. One placebo test is significant for Bundy Ranch, but the point estimate is far smaller than the actual treatment effect. The placebo effects for the Christmas discount are not consistently positive nor negative suggesting there was not a seasonal component driving membership. Aside from Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration, the placebo results for DefendJ20 are smaller than the estimated effect and vary in direction. In conclusion, I fail to find strong evidence of seasonal endogeneity occurring during the time of the tactics, which might bias the estimated effects on recruitment.

Table 7. Average Effect of Oath Keepers Tactics Using Alternative Years

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<i>Membership Discounts</i>						
Veteran's Day Discount 2014	-5.35 [-13.25, 2.49]	22.88 [21.74, 23.98]	0.71 [-0.82, 2.12]	2.23 [-0.04, 4.24]	-0.98 [-1.67, -0.23]	-
Constitution Day Discount 2017	-1.48 [-2.95, -0.1]	-0.26 [-2.39, 1.77]	3.01 [-1.25, 6.98]	4.13 [-0.49, 8.99]	-0.14 [-3.48, 3.2]	-
Christmas and New Years Discount 2017	27.5 [26.41, 28.56]	-2.41 [-3.73, -1.06]	-15.05 [-23.1, -5.07]	-0.15 [-1.14, 0.86]	2.36 [1.68, 3.06]	2.2 [1.6, 2.81]
Memorial Day Discount 2018	-3.57 [-6.43, -0.68]	-2.48 [-5.15, 0.29]	-1.13 [-21.47, 24.19]	1.85 [0.9, 2.87]	-0.38 [-1.48, 0.8]	3.62 [2.98, 4.24]
Flash Discount 2018	-4.35 [-12.6, 3.72]	7.62 [5.29, 10.03]	5.93 [-1.67, 13.03]	2.13 [-0.61, 4.92]	2.69 [0.51, 4.89]	38.47 [32.92, 44.19]
<i>Callouts</i>						
Bundy Ranch Callout 2014	1.8 [-0.04, 3.69]	28.21 [25.98, 30.25]	-5.78 [-24.99, 12.49]	-0.19 [-2.37, 2.72]	0.61 [-1.54, 3.74]	-0.53 [-3.08, 2.04]
Big Sky Callout 2015	-0.06 [-1.3, 1.18]	0.29 [-0.76, 1.34]	12.9 [7.75, 17.78]	0.47 [-0.17, 1.1]	-18.71 [-40.31, 6.47]	-
DefendJ20 2017	48.61 [27.72, 68.85]	2.4 [-0.77, 5.91]	3.77 [1.87, 5.6]	-5.82 [-10.51, -1.05]	7.12 [5.72, 8.57]	-2.41 [-3.79, -1.07]
<i>Sports Sponsorship</i>						
NASCAR Sponsorship 2013	-9.56 [-11.7, -7.4]	-17.89 [-21.69, -14.62]	2.72 [-84.99, 85.12]	3.5 [1.91, 5]	0.1 [-1.8, 1.82]	-3.87 [-8.08, 0.15]

Note: Brackets are 95 percent credibility/confidence intervals. Bolded and underlined are the years that the event took place. All estimates use a two week pre-treatment period.

To check the findings' sensitivity to membership type, I rerun the analysis including monthly and lifetime membership signups. The results are statistically and substantively similar. Additionally, I re-estimated all the analysis using the Oath Keepers Google Trends as the outcome. The statistical significance and signage are the same as using the actual recruitment values for all tactics except the Christmas Discount. The findings are presented in the [online appendix](#).

7. The Interaction Between Push and Pull Factors

The interaction between push and pull factors remains an open area for extremist researchers (Vergani et al. 2018). Previous work tends to study how economic hardships and changes in the political and demographic landscapes push individuals towards extremism (Enders and Hoover 2012; Crost 2021; Piazza 2016; Friebe, Liebald, and Sabet 2023). I investigate how these push factors interact with ways organizations pull in potential recruits by comparing recruitment for counties in a characteristic's top quartile to the bottom quartiles during each tactic. I focus on five characteristics previously discussed: income inequality, median household income, political affiliation, percent white, and rurality.²¹

The differential effects are estimated using a two-way fixed effects specification:

where $z_{i,t}$ are the number of Oath Keepers to join per 100,000 in county i on day t . $D_{i,t}$ is an indicator equal to one if county i is in the top 25 percent and t is after the start of the event. Each tactic/characteristic combination is estimated separately, and standard errors are clustered at the county level. γ_t and γ_i are the time and county fixed effects. δ estimates the differential effects of a tactic between the counties in the top and bottom quartiles of a given characteristic, meaning that the counties in the middle quartiles are dropped.²² If $\delta > 0$ ($\delta < 0$), then the pull factors are amplified (dampened) by the push factor.

²¹ See Section 4.4 for additional characteristic details.

²² The plausibility of the parallel trends assumption is investigated in the [online appendix](#). I fail to find evidence of diverging trends in the pre-event periods. Based on this, I assume that the differences in recruitment rates during the events are attributed to the county-level characteristics.

Table 8. Two-way Fixed Effects Analysis of Economic Inequality Between Counties in the Top and Bottom Quartiles

	Discounts				Callouts				Sports Sponsorship
	Veteran's Day 2014	Constitution Day 2017	Christmas/New Years 2017	Memorial Day 2018	Flash 2018	Bundy Ranch 2014	Big Sky 2015	DefendJ20 2017	NASCAR 2013
<i>Panel A: Income inequality</i>									
I(Top quartile) X I(During event)	-0.009***	-0.001**	-0.0002	-0.00003	-0.004	-0.006***	-0.00007	0.0003	0.0008
	(0.002)	(0.0006)	(0.0004)	(0.001)	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Number of Clusters	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566
<i>Panel B: Median household income</i>									
I(Top quartile) X I(During event)	-0.003	-0.0006	-0.0008**	0.0004	-0.005	0.0001	0.001	-0.004	-0.001
	(0.003)	(0.0008)	(0.0004)	(0.0009)	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.001)
Number of Clusters	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564
<i>Panel C: Percent Republican/Libertarian</i>									
I(Top quartile) X I(During event)	0.006**	0.002***	0.001*	-0.0006	0.018**	0.007***	0.006**	0.0004	-0.00006
	(0.002)	(0.0008)	(0.0007)	(0.0009)	(0.008)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Number of Clusters	1,556	1,556	1,556	1,556	1,556	1,556	1,555	1,556	1,556
<i>Panel D: Percent rural</i>									
I(Top quartile) X I(During event)	0.006	0.001	-0.001	0.001	0.005	0.015***	0.0005	0.007	0.003
	(0.004)	(0.0009)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.002)
Number of Clusters	1,565	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,564	1,565	1,564	1,564	1,566
<i>Panel E: Percent white</i>									
I(Top quartile) X I(During event)	0.012***	-0.0005	0.0002	-0.0003	0.002	0.010***	-0.004	0.002	-0.001
	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.002)
Number of Clusters	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566
Std.Errors	by: county	by: county	by: county	by: county	by: county	by: county	by: county	by: county	by: county
FE: Day	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
FE: County	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Outcome Average	0.008	0.003	0.002	0.001	0.005	0.015	0.011	0.003	0.004

Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Outcome average is the average number of Oath Keepers per 100,000 for all counties before and after the callout event. Panels refer to the county-level characteristic used to partition the counties into top and bottom quartiles. I(Top Quartile) is an indicator if a county is in the top quartile. The reference group is the bottom quartile. I(During Event) is an indicator equal to one if the day is during an event and zero if the day is before the event. Middle quartiles and days after the event are dropped from the analysis. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All estimates are weighted by county population.

Table 8 suggests that pull factors interact with some, but not all, push factors. First economic inequality does not differentially increase recruitment. Contrary to the relative deprivation hypothesis, income inequality muted recruitment during discounts and callouts (Panel A). The most income equal counties gained 0.009 more new Oath Keepers during the Veteran's Day discount, or an increase of over 100 percent from the baseline mean, compared to the most unequal counties. The Bundy Ranch callout event was also most successful in counties with the lowest income inequality. Similarly, median household income did not increase tactic efficacy. Panel B shows tactics were relatively independent of a county's median household income, although it is noisily estimated.

Tactics were more effective in counties with the highest share of Republican/Libertarian votes compared to counties with the lowest, suggesting a positive interaction between a county's political leanings and pull factors. Panel C shows that the callouts and discounts were more successful in heavily Republican/Libertarian counties, with Memorial Day 2018 as the exception. In summary, extremist organizations' pull factors appear more effective in counties with the most Republican/Libertarian votes, compared to those with the least.

Finally, there is suggestive evidence of positive interactions between whiteness, rurality and recruitment tactics, as shown in Panels D and E. While noisily estimated for most tactics, the findings are mostly positive and economically meaningful. The first tactics caused the largest (and statistically significant) increase in new membership, specifically Bundy Ranch. A similar pattern is observed for the size of a county's white population (Panel E). Whiter counties were more responsive to discounts during Bundy Ranch and the first discounts.

8. Conclusion

I study how violent extremist organizations pull in new members by examining the tactics of one prominent group, the Oath Keepers. Militia-style confrontations with the federal government greatly increase recruitment, as do membership discounts. The effects of both tactics are startling: three armed standoffs attracted more than 1,000 new members, while offering a \$10 discount attracted over 400 new members. Surprisingly, a Nascar sponsorship caused persistent decreases in recruitment.

Additionally, these pull factors interact with some, but not all, commonly studied push factors. The Oath Keepers' tactics were amplified in the most politically conservative counties and muted in counties with more economic inequality, contrary to a relative deprivation hypothesis. Tactic effectiveness was relatively independent of a county's median income. Together, these findings showcase how the efficacy of extremist recruitment tactics can be amplified or dampened by push factors.

From a policy perspective, these results offer some insights into how threats from extremist organizations might be reduced. My empirics indicate that the Oath Keepers demonstrate a cost effective way to showcase ideological fervor, which was rewarded with more recruits (and membership dues). Contrary to the group's ideologically driven persona, interviews and congressional testimony from former members assert that the organization was focused on revenue, selling their form of violent extremism for profit (Tatenhove 2023). Quickly, publicly, and credibly highlighting such hypocrisies is likely to slow the inflow of new members, starving the group of organizational capacity and revenue. Additionally, the membership discounts highlight that the Oath Keepers are not at all selective in their recruitment (unlike previously studied violent organizations). Thus, they could be infiltrated, which would compromise their ability to organize illegal activity secretly. The evaluation and generalizability of such policies is left for future research.

While the Oath Keepers' data is uniquely available, data of this type is not unique. Extremist organizations keep records of their members, raise revenue, and plan and execute events. Future leaks and data revealed through legal processes have the potential to provide new insights into how domestic violent extremists recruit, but will likely face similar data limitations. I showcase how freely available Google Trends data integrated into a synthetic control-like framework can be leveraged to identify causal effects in this data-constrained research space. Hopefully, the methods and insights developed in this paper will further our understanding of how domestic extremist organizations pull in potential members.

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