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ASSESSING UN-REDD+'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CLAIMS: EVIDENCE FROM PERU

BRIELLE FRANCKOWIAK

Abstract

This study analyzed the regional-level impacts on welfare, employment, and sectoral output of UN-REDD+ programmes in Peru. Although the United Nations promotes REDD+ as a way towards a "green economy," empirical evidence on its macroeconomic impacts is limited. To evaluate this, I utilized a Difference-in-Differences design with a staggered treatment structure. I then compared 11 treated departments to 14 untreated departments using annual panel data from 2007 through 2018. This was done to assess changes in three domains: sectoral Gross Value Added, employment indicators, and multidimensional poverty measures. Across all models, the results showed no statistical significance regarding the effects of REDD+ on departmental economic or welfare trends. Sectoral output, employment levels, and poverty indicators evolved similarly in treated and untreated departments, suggesting that observed trends reflect national dynamics rather than REDD+ implementation. These findings indicate that REDD+ primarily functions as an environmental conservation programme rather than as a driver of regional economic development. These results call into question the development claims of the United Nations' REDD+ programme. Evidence from Peru suggests that international climate finance mechanisms have limited capacity to generate economic gains at the subnational level.

1. Introduction

Amid deforestation and the climate crisis, carbon emissions have become a growing international concern. Recognizing this, the United Nations developed a collaborative initiative titled "REDD+." Alternatively, the UN's Programme for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. The primary goal of the initiative is to reduce carbon emissions through protecting forests. The UN also notes that choosing to conserve through REDD+ offers "numerous economic benefits to developing countries" (UN-REDD Programme 2026).

The UNFCCC details the three phases of REDD+ application: Readiness, Demonstration, and Implementation (UNFCCC 2026). The initial "readiness" phase focuses on developing national strategies and policies. This includes coordinating with the country's government and non-party stakeholders. While REDD+ engages multiple local "non-party stakeholders," national governments oversee its implementation and reporting. Next is the demonstration phase, which involves implementing the policy and building capacity. Here, the plans proposed in the "readiness" phase are executed and tested. In the final phase, implementation, the plan is fully implemented at the national level. Outcomes are then measured, reported, and verified to enable payments. If the agreed-upon forested area is successfully preserved, forest communities and their governments receive payments from carbon credits, with REDD+ serving as the designer and intermediary (Felicani-Robles 2022).

Ultimately, the UN-REDD+ programme aims to reduce deforestation by channeling carbon market revenue to local communities that protect forests (UN-REDD Programme 2012). From this, UN-REDD+ touts the creation of a "Green economy," in which human well-being and equity are improved as countries transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy (UN-REDD Programme 2018). They also cite several macroeconomic positive externalities of the programme, such as "green" job creation and poverty reduction (UN-REDD Programme 2018). Even more, the UN presents REDD+ as a means to achieving its various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some goals align closely with REDD+'s mission, such as SDG 15, which focuses on the sustainability of terrestrial ecosystems, and SDG 13, which calls for urgent action to tackle climate change and its impacts. Other goals, however, can only be achieved through the green economy that UN-REDD+ claims to bolster. These include SDG 1, which aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere; SDG 7, which seeks to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; and SDG 8, which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, as well as full and productive employment and decent work for all (REDD+ Mongolia 2017, 3). The UN states that REDD+ contributes to achieving these specific goals in programme host countries, yet the existing literature on its impact has been inconsistent. My research assessed the regional-level impacts of UN-REDD+ programmes on welfare, employment, and sectoral output in Peru. As no statistical significance was found, the validity of the UN's "green economy" and "SDG" rhetoric is challenged.

Peru is home to over 68 million hectares of the Amazon rainforest and is one of REDD+'s most prominent partners. The Amazon, also known as the "lungs of the Earth," is the world's most biodiverse region and is home to Indigenous peoples with deep ties to the forest (Dominguez et al. 2023, 2). For millennia, the rainforest has provided these people with food, shelter, and creation. However, with globalization, these communities have been greatly exploited. Industries such as mining, logging, agriculture, and oil extraction have generated billions in profits while also causing massive deforestation and threatening Indigenous livelihoods (Kingsbury et al. 2019, 545). Some communities have begun logging as their only economic option, while others have resisted expansionism (usually at the cost of economic opportunity and resource access).

The Amazon rainforest also plays a key role in mitigating carbon emissions, as the rainforest absorbs a quarter of the world's emissions. As the country with the second-largest portion of the Amazon, Peru plays an important role in reducing deforestation. Currently, under UN-REDD, 15,000 hectares of the Peruvian Amazon are protected. Nevertheless, as of 2023, Peru had the third-highest deforestation rate in Latin America (Rainforest Foundation US 2025). While Peru's poverty levels have decreased slightly in recent years, its carbon emissions have grown considerably (Ritchie and Rosado 2025). Peru's adaptive capacity and resource efficiency are also low compared to those of its neighboring countries (Global Green Growth Institute 2016, 5). Although UN-REDD+ programmes claim to offer an alternative path, it is unclear whether they have delivered the promised positive externalities to Peru.

Ultimately, I selected Peru as the case study due to its combination of empirical relevance and data suitability. As the country containing the second-largest share of the Amazon rainforest, Peru represents a critical site for REDD+ implementation. It also hosts one of the highest concentrations of active REDD+ projects within the Amazon basin, making it a particularly appropriate context for evaluating programme impacts. In addition, Peru offers relatively accessible and consistent subnational data, allowing for more reliable longitudinal analysis. Focusing on a single country, rather than multiple countries, increases data reliability by ensuring consistency in collection methodology and limiting confounding variation across differing national policy environments.

To evaluate these economic implications, this study used a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) design comparing Peruvian departments that implemented UN-REDD+ projects with those that did not. Because interventions began in different years, each treated department was coded by its specific start date, allowing a staggered treatment structure. I utilized an annual panel of 25 departments from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática* (INEI) to analyze whether REDD+ affected three domains: sectoral economic output (GVA), employment, and poverty indicators. Department fixed effects accounted for structural differences between regions, while year fixed effects captured nationwide economic shocks and trends.

This approach provided a macro-level test of whether REDD+ has produced measurable changes in sectoral output, employment, or poverty indicators at the regional scale. While many evaluations rely on case studies or qualitative evidence, few examine whether REDD+ generates detectable economic shifts across provinces within a single country. By applying a consistent econometric framework across multiple outcomes, this study assessed whether REDD+ offers communities a meaningful economic alternative to deforestation.

2. Literature Review

Attempts to evaluate the economic impact of UN-REDD+ Programmes have grown significantly throughout the past decade. However, the evidence found globally is inconsistent, with a variety of different methodologies used and countries studied. Existing research can be grouped into three main bodies: (1) micro-level household and community case studies in Peru, (2) broader macroeconomic or multi-country analyses of REDD+ mechanisms, and (3) comparative case studies from other Amazonian REDD+ countries. Together, these studies reveal how REDD+ affects livelihoods, forest outcomes, and governance, but they also expose persistent limitations in quantitative evaluations at the regional scale.

2.1 Micro-Level Evidence from Peru

Several important studies focus on household-level outcomes of REDD+ and related conservation programmes within Peru. These studies largely examine early programme impact.

A 2024 study in Peru's Ucayali department found no early, measurable effects of REDD+ or Peru's NFCP on income or land use. However, participants did report different well-being perceptions across the two programmes. Naime et al. noted that NFCP households are more likely to report positive impacts than REDD+ participants. This is largely due to better payment delivery, transparency, and community involvement (2024, 10). These findings show how the quality of project design and implementation shapes community buy-in and perceived benefits.

Another Peru-based panel study investigated REDD+'s effect on household forest revenues using a BACI (Before-After-Control-Intervention) design and matching. Despite a substantial decline in forest income between 2011 and 2014, the authors showed that REDD+ did not cause the observed losses, effectively demonstrating that early REDD+ interventions "did no harm" to forest-based livelihoods (Solis et al. 2021, 9).

Together, these studies showed two themes:

1. REDD+'s early economic effects at the household scale are limited or neutral.
2. Project design and governance shape *perceived* well-being far more than *measurable* changes in well-being.

However, these studies remain highly localized, examining only a small number of communities and capturing short-term changes rather than broader economic dynamics across Peru.

2.2 Macro-Level & International REDD+ Literature

A second body of work uses cross-national analyses and global models to assess REDD+. According to this literature, REDD+ implementation was more complex and costly than expected, with readiness, monitoring, and enforcement costs resulting in trade-offs between equity and efficiency (Robinson et al. 2019, 174). The literature suggested that aligning carbon goals with pro-poor development is challenging due to ongoing issues such as leakage, additionality, and unequal benefit-sharing.

Macroeconomic modeling suggested that REDD+ transfers may have non-monotonic welfare effects. Lower transfer levels may boost agricultural output, but higher transfers could reduce national welfare by skewing land-use incentives (Ollivier 2012, 322). When combined, these frameworks show how REDD+ operates within more general structural economic constraints, raising questions about how countries (especially those dependent on extractive industries) adapt to conservation-based financial flows.

Although the global economic justification for REDD+ has been made clear by this literature, empirical assessments of economic performance at the subnational level- a scale where resource distribution and policy coordination actually take place -rarely follow from its macro-level insights.

2.3 Comparative Case Studies of Amazonian REDD+ Projects Beyond Peru

The studies from Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia add significant value to understanding how REDD+ shapes diverse livelihood and forest outcomes across different sociopolitical contexts.

A multi-year panel study in Pará, Brazil, examined how long the outcomes of REDD+ persist. The results suggested that initially REDD+ reduced deforestation and increased well-being. However, many of these benefits weakened once payments stopped. Forest loss rebounded, though previously protected forests were left intact, and well-being fell. This suggested that without ongoing financial support, REDD+ delays rather than prevents deforestation (Carrilho et al. 2022, 3).

Work from the Bolivian Amazon identified these institutional trade-offs of community forest management. The authors highlighted how REDD+ can reinforce land inequalities, reduce food security due to competing land-use demands, and increase dependence on carbon markets when market-centric approaches pay little attention to socio-ecological diversity (Bottazzi et al. 2014, 108). A paper on the financialization of nature in Colombia further critiqued carbon markets. It argued that climate policies, including REDD+, prioritize capital accumulation over environmental protection and disproportionately harm Afro-Colombian communities in mining regions (Gilbertson 2021, 27).

Together, these international case studies indicate that REDD+ often conserves forest cover. However, livelihood impacts are often mixed, context-dependent, and shaped by governance quality, market volatility, and long-term financing structures.

2.4 The Research Gap: Departmental Analysis within Peru

Although there is a great deal of micro-level and global research on the impacts of REDD+, very few quantitative studies have evaluated its impacts at the departmental level in Peru. Existing impact studies focus on short-term household outcomes in a small number of communities, capturing only early implementation effects. They therefore leave open the question of whether REDD+ is associated with broader changes in regional economic indicators such as gross value added, employment, poverty, or social services.

A regional lens is necessary because South American REDD+ projects are largely focused on Amazonian departments, where subnational governments determine land-use enforcement, rural development, and service provision. Department-level analysis provides insight into structural economic trends that are not discernible within household case studies. By conducting a panel-data evaluation at this scale, this paper filled an important gap in the literature and assessed how REDD+ aligns with Peru's broader green development goals.

3. Data & Methodology

This study evaluated whether UN-REDD+ interventions have changed Peru’s regional economic performance, employment levels, and poverty outcomes. I used a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) framework applied to a balanced annual panel covering Peru’s 25 departments over roughly a decade. The approach used variation in the timing and location of REDD+ implementation to estimate whether treated departments experienced differential changes relative to untreated areas.

3.1 Data Sources and Structure

The analysis used department-level annual data from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática* (INEI). The INEI is Peru's main government agency for collecting and publishing official statistics. It standardizes data collection, ensuring consistency across regions and over time. Because it follows established statistical methods and is responsible for national reporting, it provided a reliable source of longitudinal economic data, despite being a government institution (INEI 2026). The data covers the major socio-economic indicators relevant to development outcomes. The sample is a balanced panel with consistent time coverage across all 25 departments.

Within the departments, 11 received REDD+ interventions. The other 14 departments served as untreated controls. It should be noted that UN-REDD+ projects did not roll out uniformly. Therefore, the intervention start years vary by department, ranging from 2010 to 2016. I incorporated this staggered timing into the DiD model by constructing department-specific "post-intervention" variables.

The study examined three economic domains:

1. Gross Value Added (GVA): 2007-2018
   Five sectoral dependent variables tested:
    - Manufacturing
    - Agriculture, Livestock, Hunting, and Forestry
    - Electricity, Gas, and Water
    - Oil, Gas, and Mineral Extraction
    - Fishing and Aquaculture

Gross Value Added per sector is defined as the total amount of money (measured in Peru's currency, the Peso) generated by various economic sectors in any given year. While INEI measures 15 sectors annually, I selected the five most relevant to the UN's development goals and therefore the most likely to be impacted by UN-REDD+. These dependent variables were critical as a shift towards a "green economy" would become apparent through them. For example, REDD+ purports to reduce extractive activities in the regions where it operates (Wahabu 2025, 82). If this was true, there should be a decrease in GVA from the extraction sector in the regions REDD+ where operates.

2. Employment: 2008-2018
   Dependent variables:
    - Total economically active population
    - Total employed population

Employment rates in Peru were measured annually by the INEI and reported by each department. Employment outcomes were measured using two dependent variables: the total economically active population and the total employed population. These variables capture both labor force participation and actual employment levels, providing a broad view of regional labor market conditions. They are relevant to REDD+'s development claims, as the programme is often associated with the creation of "green jobs" and alternative livelihoods (REDD+ Mongolia 2017, 1). If such effects have occurred at scale, they should be reflected in changes to overall employment patterns in treated regions.

3. Poverty & Social Assistance: 2009-2018
   Dependent variables:
   - Percentage of population with at least one unmet basic need
   - Percentage of households benefiting from food assistance programs

Poverty and social welfare outcomes were measured using the percentage of the population with at least one unmet basic need and the percentage of households receiving food assistance. These variables capture both structural poverty conditions and reliance on social support programs. They are relevant to REDD+'s development claims, as improvements in livelihoods should reduce poverty and dependence on assistance. If such effects occur at scale, they should be reflected in declines across these indicators in treated regions.

3.2 Difference-In-Differences Design

The methodology relied on a standard Difference-in-Differences model. This approach compared changes over time between regions with and without REDD+ to estimate the impact of REDD+. DiD assumed that, without the programme, both groups would have followed similar trends (the "parallel trends" assumption). As no significant differences were found, it suggests both groups moved similarly over time, indicating no measurable effect from REDD+. Notably, this approach controlled for both time-invariant characteristics of each region and nationwide shocks affecting all regions equally. The statistical model used is as follows:

$$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 * Treatment + \beta 2 * Post + \beta 3 * Treatment * Post + e$$

A department was coded as "treated" if it had at least one REDD+ programme started between 2010 and 2016. For each treated department, I assigned an intervention start year based on the official UN-REDD rollout timeline. Using this:

- treatment = 1 for treated departments, 0 otherwise
- post = 1 for years ≥ that department's intervention year
- treat_post = treatment × post, capturing the causal effect of REDD+ in the DiD model

I assigned departments a numeric identifier (dept_id). I estimated each model with department fixed effects and year fixed effects. Department fixed effects absorbed all time-invariant characteristics (e.g., geography, culture, historical development patterns, land availability, persistent institutional quality, etc). Year fixed effects, on the other hand, absorbed national macroeconomic events (e.g., GDP growth cycles, commodity price fluctuations, inflation shocks, policy reforms, and the post-2014 oil downturn). Standard errors were clustered at the department level to account for serial correlation in outcomes within regions over time. I then ran these regressions in Stata.

3.3 Model Setup

a. GVA Models

The GVA analysis examined whether REDD+ programmes shifted value-added economic activity in relevant sectors. To do this, I ran a separate regression for each sector, using that sector's GVA as the outcome variable.

- Dependent variables: GVA_agriculture, GVA_manufacturing, GVA_electricity, GVA_oil, GVA_fishing
- Independent variable: treat_post
- Controls: Department FE, Year FE
- Estimation: xtreg GVAsector treat_post i.year, fe cluster (dept_id)

Sectoral GVA is particularly useful because REDD+ is often designed to influence land use and productivity in agriculture, forestry, and resource extraction. If REDD+ reshaped local economies (positively or negatively) these sectors should show it.

b. Employment Models

The model I used to test employment outcomes followed the same structure as the GVA analysis. Instead, however, I utilized labor market indicators.

- Dependent variables: Economically active population; Total employed population
- Estimation strategy: identical DiD setup with clustered FE models

These variables assessed whether REDD+ interventions affected employment. Specifically, whether there was associated displacement, job creation, or larger shifts in participation- critical for understanding local economic resilience.

c. Poverty and Social Assistance Models

Finally, I tested poverty-related outcomes to test whether REDD+ projects translated into improved living standards.

- Dependent variables: % of population with ≥1 unmet basic need; % of households benefitting from food assistance programs

The unmet-needs variable captured multidimensional poverty (e.g., housing quality, access to basic services, educational attainment) while the food-assistance measure served as a proxy for short-term material insecurity. These indicators provided a more direct measure of welfare than GVA or employment alone, helping evaluate whether REDD+ brought tangible social benefits to participating regions.

4. Results

This section analyzes the findings from the Difference-in-Differences model across the three areas studied: Sectoral Gross Value Added, employment outcomes, and poverty indicators. Across all regression results, there were no statistically significant effects of UN-REDD+ interventions on departmental economic performance or welfare. While Peru experienced large country-wide economic shifts during the study period, these changes were likely caused by national cycles/shocks rather than REDD+ project activity.

4.1 Sectoral GVA Results

Table results show that, across all five productive sectors tested, REDD+ interventions did not produce a significant change in Gross Value Added in treated departments relative to controls. The estimated effects are small, imprecise, and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Table 1

Sector	Coefficient (treat x post)	Std. Error	t-stat	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Significant
Agriculture	-0.015	0.166	-0.09	0.927	-0.357	0.326	No
Manufacturing	-0.675	0.804	-0.84	0.409	-2.335	0.984	No
electricity	-0.214	0.199	-1.07	0.293	-0.624	0.197	No
Oil	-0.349	0.356	-0.98	0.336	-1.083	0.385	No
Fishing	0.04	0.051	0.79	0.438	-0.065	0.144	No

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, Estadística, Economía

a. Agriculture, Livestock, Hunting, and Forestry

The agriculture sector- a theoretically plausible channel for REDD+ influence -showed virtually no effect. The Coefficient of the regression was –0.015 and the p-value was 0.927. The estimate was very small compared to its standard error (0.166), and the 95% confidence interval (–0.357 to 0.326) spanned both economically meaningful increases and decreases. This indicated little to no relationship between REDD+ implementation and agricultural GVA. Given that REDD+ often aims to reduce frontier agriculture, cattle-ranching, and forestry, this result suggested either limited programme scale or that impacts, if present, occurred at more localized sub-departmental levels not shown in aggregated GVA (Peterson St-Laurent et al. 2013, 517).

b. Manufacturing

Manufacturing output also showed no significant change in response to REDD+ activity. The regression coefficient was –0.675, and the p-value was 0.409. Although the point estimate was more negative than that of agriculture, its standard error (0.804) rendered the effect statistically meaningless. Manufacturing is typically less sensitive to land-use programmes, so the absence of an effect aligns with expectations that REDD+ does not change industrial output.

c. Electricity, Gas, and Water

Similar patterns were shown in utilities with a Coefficient of –0.214 and a p-value of 0.293. The utilities sector often tracks overall economic growth rather than local environmental policy changes, and the null finding here reinforced that REDD+ did not shift energy production or infrastructure investment.

d. Oil, Gas, and Mineral Extraction

Extractive sectors are central to many Peruvian regional economies. The DiD estimator showed a Coefficient of –0.349 and a p-value of 0.336. Again, the confidence interval (–1.083 to 0.385) is wide and crosses zero, reflecting substantial uncertainty. This result suggested that REDD+ neither restricted nor stimulated extractive activity, at least at the department-wide scale.

e. Fishing and Aquaculture

Finally, the fishing sector showed a small positive estimate with a Coefficient of 0.040 and a p-value of 0.438. Although positive, the effect remained non-significant; the small magnitude and narrow confidence band implied that any REDD+-related changes in coastal or riverine economic activity are negligible.

4.2 Employment Outcomes

The employment models tested whether REDD+ projects influenced labor force participation or total employment. Overall, REDD+ had no measurable impact on departmental labor markets. Employment growth appears to be a function of national conditions rather than environmental programme implementation.

Table 2

Variable	Coefficient (treat x post)	Std. Error	t-stat	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Significant
Economically Active Population	-12.611	25.478	-0.49	0.625	-65.194	39.973	No
Total Employed Population	-11.162	24.946	-0.45	0.659	-62.647	40.323	No

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, Estadística, Empleo

a. Economically Active Population

The DiD coefficient for the economically active population was –12.6, and the p-value was 0.625. This estimate was small relative to its standard error and clearly non-significant. There is no indication that REDD+ projects induced workers to enter or exit the labor force at the departmental level.

b. Total Employed Population

Employment results mirrored the findings for economic activity, with a DiD coefficient of –11.2 and a p-value of 0.659. Again, the estimate was indistinguishable from zero. These outcomes show no detectable link between REDD+ interventions and employment growth or contraction.

4.3 Poverty and Food Security Indicators

There was no empirical evidence that REDD+ changed unmet basic needs or participation in food assistance programs. Annual patterns regarding both variables were almost identical between departments. This suggested that broader national trends, not REDD+ programs, increased Peru's welfare.

Table 3

Variable	Coefficient (treat x post)	Std. Error	t-stat	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Significant
Population with ≥1 Unmet Basic Need (%)	-0.029	0.981	-0.03	0.976	-2.054	1.995	No
Households Receiving Food Assistance (%)	2.323	1.584	1.47	0.156	-0.947	5.592	No

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, Estadística, Población y vivienda

a. Unmet Basic Needs

To examine whether REDD+ affects multidimensional poverty, I used the share of residents with at least one unmet basic need as the dependent variable. After accounting for the nationwide decline in poverty, the REDD+ coefficient was –0.03, with a p-value of 0.976. This was a null result: poverty fell at a similar rate in both treated and untreated departments. Most of the change appeared to reflect national policies and economic conditions rather than the REDD+ projects themselves.

b. Households Receiving Food Assistance

Similarly, REDD+ showed no measurable impact on household participation in food assistance programs. The model results showed a Coefficient of 2.32 and a p-value of 0.156. Although the point estimate was positive, the effect was not statistically significant and is fully explained by year fixed effects rather than treatment status. Shifts in food assistance indicated nationwide program expansions or contractions, not REDD+ presence.

5. Conclusions & Discussion

The universal lack of statistical significance carries important implications regarding how the socio-economic impacts of UN-REDD+ programmes should be understood. At face value, the results suggested that REDD+ interventions did not produce detectable changes in sectoral output, employment, or poverty indicators at the departmental level in Peru. Meaning that, within Peru, REDD+ Programmes did not carry the economic development impact that the UN promises. However, this does not decisively mean that REDD+ failed.

One explanation for these null results is the analysis's time horizon. The economic effects of conservation programmes are often delayed, emerging gradually as institutional changes, land-use patterns, and local economies adjust. In addition, REDD+'s primary goal is forest conservation. So, while economic and development impacts are important, reducing deforestation is the UN-REDD+'s paramount objective. Additionally, structural differences between treated and untreated regions may influence long-term developmental trajectories in ways not fully captured by the model.

The null results reinforced the view that REDD+ is an environmental programme, not an engine of regional economic development. This interpretation aligns with the existing literature, which suggests that REDD+ primarily delivers environmental outcomes. Simultaneously, its economic benefits are often localized, uneven, and difficult to detect at higher levels of aggregation. Ultimately, REDD+ aims to reduce deforestation, strengthen land governance, and support conservation practices; any economic effects tend to be indirect, slow-moving, and highly place-specific (Cursaru 2017, 12). The United Nations' welfare benefits likely operate on a smaller scale. Small-scale gains in income, employment, or resource access may occur in treated communities without significantly shifting regional averages (Wunder et al. 2024, 6). The lack of department-level change aligns with what one would reasonably expect from programmes that operate at the scale of individual communities, indigenous territories, and specific forest concessions rather than entire departments.

5.1 Limitations & Further Research

Several limitations may explain why the study found no significant economic impact of REDD+ programmes. First, the data was too macro. REDD+ interventions typically occur at the community or landscape scale, while this study used department-level averages. Such aggregation will almost inevitably wash out subtle local gains, such as increases in community forestry income or small shifts in agricultural diversification, that would never register in regional GVA or employment totals.

Second, treating REDD+ as a simple yes/no variable masked substantial heterogeneity across projects. For example, REDD+ sites focus on a variety of projects, including reforming governance, supporting livelihoods, and strengthening monitoring capacities (Milne et al. 2019, 85). These differences matter, yet the dataset cannot differentiate them. Relatedly, treated departments differ markedly from control departments: REDD+ provinces are more forested, more rural, and often poorer. Although DiD theoretically controlled for fixed differences, it could not fully eliminate concerns that these structural contrasts influenced long-run trends.

Finally, the time horizon was limited. Economic spillovers from conservation programmes may take years or decades to materialize, but the available INEI data restricted the analysis to a relatively short window. Without longer-term datasets, long-run impacts remained unobservable. This is particularly important given that REDD+ programmes are designed to produce gradual, long-term changes rather than immediate economic effects.

Future research should focus on quantitatively evaluating REDD+ at the scale at which it operates. Household- or community-level data would allow for a more precise assessment of localized economic impacts, particularly in areas such as income, employment quality, and livelihood diversification. While there is an abundance of community-scale literature that is qualitative or ethnographic, there is a severe lack of econometric work done. While this is likely due to a lack of data, measured livelihood improvements will only be found through such research.

In addition, disaggregating REDD+ by project type could help identify which interventions, such as governance reforms versus livelihood programs, are more likely to generate economic benefits. Extending the time horizon of analysis is also critical, as long-term datasets would better capture delayed economic effects. Finally, comparative studies across countries or regions may help determine whether the patterns observed in Peru reflect broader structural limitations of REDD+ or are specific to the Peruvian context.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

These findings suggest that REDD+ should not be framed primarily as a tool for economic development or "green job" creation. Its primary value lies in environmental protection, carbon mitigation, and support for sustainable land management, rather than large-scale economic transformation. Policymakers should therefore align expectations with the programme's actual strengths and avoid overstating its capacity to generate broad-based economic growth at the regional level.

If economic co-benefits are a policy objective, REDD+ programmes must be more intentionally designed to produce them. This includes integrating targeted livelihood components such as skills training, support for community forestry, development of value-added forest products, and small-scale enterprise development (Unnikrishnan et al. 2022, 12). In addition, programmes could incorporate direct financial incentives or revenue-sharing mechanisms to ensure that local communities capture a greater share of the economic benefits associated with conservation. Without these targeted interventions, economic gains are likely to remain limited, indirect, and localized.

Programme design should also account for the highly localized nature of REDD+ impacts. Rather than relying solely on national or regional implementation strategies, policymakers should prioritize place-based approaches that adapt to local economic conditions, land use patterns, and community needs. Greater involvement of indigenous and local communities in programme design and implementation may improve both environmental and economic outcomes by aligning incentives with local realities.

Finally, improving data collection is essential for accurately evaluating REDD+ outcomes. Current assessments relying on aggregated regional data risk overlooking meaningful local variation. Future evaluations should incorporate community- or household-level indicators, including measures of income, employment quality, and livelihood diversification. More granular data would allow researchers and policymakers to better identify where REDD+ is generating social and economic benefits, and under what conditions those benefits emerge.

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Data Appendix

. **Stata Outputs for GVA Variables:**

A. Agriculture, Livestock, Hunting, & Forestry:

Model:
xtreg GVAagriculture treat_post i.year, fe robust
N = 300, Departments = 25

treat_post: –0.015 (p = 0.927) — *not significant*

Regression Table:

treat_post	-0.0154	(0.1656)	p=0.927
Year FE:			
2008	0.1520	(0.0322)	p=0.000
2009	0.2116	(0.0418)	p=0.000
2010	0.2714	(0.0570)	p=0.000
2011	0.4286	(0.0813)	p=0.000
2012	0.5144	(0.0930)	p=0.000
2013	0.5514	(0.1074)	p=0.000
2014	0.6915	(0.1428)	p=0.000
2015	0.7979	(0.1586)	p=0.000
2016	0.9033	(0.1917)	p=0.000
2017	0.9589	(0.2021)	p=0.000
2018	1.0293	(0.2102)	p=0.000

sigma_u = 1.1334
sigma_e = 0.3240
rho = 0.9244

B. Manufacturing:

Model:
xtreg GVAmanufacturing treat_post i.year, fe robust
N = 300, Departments = 25

treat_post: –0.675 (p = 0.409) — *not significant*

Regression Table:

treat_post	-0.6753	(0.8041)	p=0.409
Year FE:			
2008	0.2056	(0.1206)	p=0.101
2009	0.1148	(0.1493)	p=0.450

2010	0.5506	(0.3726)	p=0.152
2011	0.8494	(0.5058)	p=0.106
2012	1.1528	(0.7168)	p=0.121
2013	1.2962	(0.8327)	p=0.133
2014	1.3499	(0.8881)	p=0.142
2015	1.5315	(0.9835)	p=0.133
2016	1.6877	(1.1226)	p=0.146
2017	1.8397	(1.1851)	p=0.134
2018	2.0281	(1.2815)	p=0.127

sigma_u = 8.7370
sigma_e = 1.8556
rho = 0.9568

C. Electricity, Gas, & Water:

Model:
xtreg GVAelectricity treat_post i.year, fe robust

treat_post: –0.214 (p = 0.293) — *not significant*

Regression Table:

treat_post -0.2137 (0.1989) p=0.293

Year FE:

2008	-0.0024	(0.0530)	p=0.964
2009	0.0168	(0.0599)	p=0.781
2010	0.0322	(0.0718)	p=0.658
2011	0.0613	(0.0892)	p=0.498
2012	0.1018	(0.1153)	p=0.386
2013	0.1424	(0.1395)	p=0.317
2014	0.2175	(0.1912)	p=0.266
2015	0.2975	(0.2277)	p=0.204
2016	0.4353	(0.2965)	p=0.155
2017	0.4542	(0.2940)	p=0.135
2018	0.5157	(0.3249)	p=0.126

sigma_u = 1.0865
sigma_e = 0.4773
rho = 0.8382

D. Oil, Gas, & Mineral Extraction:

Model:

xtreg GVAOil treat_post i.year, fe robust

treat_post: –0.349 (p = 0.336) — *not significant*

Regression Table:

treat_post	-0.3491	(0.3555)	p=0.336
Year FE:			
2008	-0.0600	(0.1199)	p=0.621
2009	-0.3156	(0.1801)	p=0.093
2010	0.2236	(0.1782)	p=0.222
2011	0.9500	(0.3128)	p=0.006
2012	0.6631	(0.2726)	p=0.023
2013	0.4703	(0.3002)	p=0.130
2014	0.2238	(0.2744)	p=0.423
2015	0.0430	(0.2239)	p=0.849
2016	0.3730	(0.3125)	p=0.244
2017	0.8362	(0.3967)	p=0.046
2018	0.5554	(0.4207)	p=0.199

sigma_u = 2.0455

sigma_e = 0.9561

rho = 0.8207

E. Fishing & Aquaculture

Model:

xtreg GVAfishing treat_post i.year, fe robust

treat_post: +0.040 (p = 0.438) — *not significant*

Regression Table:

treat_post	0.0399	(0.0506)	p=0.438
Year FE:			
2008	-0.0008	(0.0050)	p=0.874
2009	0.0072	(0.0090)	p=0.432
2010	0.0092	(0.0151)	p=0.548
2011	0.0640	(0.0333)	p=0.066
2012	-0.0080	(0.0167)	p=0.637
2013	0.0424	(0.0237)	p=0.086

2014	0.0000	(0.0210)	p=0.999
2015	0.0520	(0.0316)	p=0.113
2016	0.0420	(0.0207)	p=0.054
2017	0.0496	(0.0247)	p=0.056
2018	0.1344	(0.0537)	p=0.019

sigma_u = 0.2164
sigma_e = 0.0959
rho = 0.8359

II. Stata Outputs for Employment Variables:

A. Economically Active Population

```
Fixed-effects (within) regression               Number of obs     =        275
Group variable: dept_id                         Number of groups  =         25

R-squared:                                      Obs per group:
     Within  = 0.2109                                         min =         11
     Between = 0.0087                                         avg =       11.0
     Overall = 0.0019                                         max =         11

                                                F(11, 24)         =      10.08
corr(u_i, Xb) = 0.0142                          Prob > F          =     0.0000

                               (Std. err. adjusted for 25 clusters in dept_id)
```

active_pop	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P>|t|	[95% conf.	interval]
treat_post	-12.61055	25.47785	-0.49	0.625	-65.19426	39.97315
Year						
2009	11.776	4.007877	2.94	0.007	3.504149	20.04785
2010	26.29053	14.1789	1.85	0.076	-2.973279	55.55435
2011	34.69053	17.63012	1.97	0.061	-1.69625	71.07732
2012	42.96696	23.58344	1.82	0.081	-5.706863	91.64077
2013	50.86338	23.06931	2.20	0.037	3.250661	98.47609
2014	55.10864	25.16855	2.19	0.039	3.163308	107.054
2015	59.23264	29.9231	1.98	0.059	-2.525605	120.9909
2016	75.40064	37.85474	1.99	0.058	-2.727703	153.529
2017	87.83664	43.93226	2.00	0.057	-2.835083	178.5084
2018	97.76464	45.46356	2.15	0.042	3.932474	191.5968
_cons	606.272	16.67612	36.36	0.000	571.8542	640.6898
sigma_u	966.53873					
sigma_e	56.806151					
rho	.99655765	(fraction of variance due to u_i)				

B. Total Employed Population

```
Fixed-effects (within) regression               Number of obs     =        275
Group variable: dept_id                         Number of groups  =         25

R-squared:                                      Obs per group:
     Within  = 0.2345                                         min =         11
     Between = 0.0082                                         avg =       11.0
     Overall = 0.0018                                         max =         11

                                                F(11, 24)         =      10.67
corr(u_i, Xb) = 0.0123                          Prob > F          =     0.0000

                                 (Std. err. adjusted for 25 clusters in dept_id)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
             |               Robust
    employed | Coefficient  std. err.      t    P>|t|     [95% conf. interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
  treat_post |  -11.16195   24.94572    -0.45   0.659     -62.6474    40.32349
             |
        Year |
       2009  |      12.18   4.131559     2.95   0.007      3.65288    20.70712
       2010  |   28.03487   14.69083     1.91   0.068    -2.285508    58.35525
       2011  |   36.62687   18.52331     1.98   0.060    -1.603374    74.85711
       2012  |   46.40935   25.56164     1.82   0.082    -6.347275    99.16597
       2013  |   52.51182   25.41604     2.07   0.050      .055691     104.968
       2014  |   58.40326    27.3202     2.14   0.043     2.017145    114.7894
       2015  |   63.31926   31.20012     2.03   0.054    -1.074631    127.7131
       2016  |   74.45526   35.84234     2.08   0.049     .4803126    148.4302
       2017  |   86.94326   41.38157     2.10   0.046     1.535895    172.3506
       2018  |   97.62726   43.71238     2.23   0.035     7.409348    187.8452
             |
       _cons |     578.36   17.15036    33.72   0.000     542.9634    613.7566
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
     sigma_u |  912.42697
     sigma_e |  52.775827
         rho |  .99666556   (fraction of variance due to u_i)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
```

III. Stata Outputs for Multidimensional Poverty Variables:

A. Population with at Least One Unmet Basic Need (%)

```
. xtreg unmet_need treat_post i.Year, fe robust

Fixed-effects (within) regression               Number of obs     =        250
Group variable: dept_id                         Number of groups  =         25

R-squared:                                      Obs per group:
     Within  = 0.6816                                         min =         10
     Between = 0.1698                                         avg =       10.0
     Overall = 0.0684                                         max =         10

                                                F(10, 24)         =      22.37
corr(u_i, Xb) = -0.0013                         Prob > F          =     0.0000

                              (Std. err. adjusted for 25 clusters in dept_id)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
             |               Robust
  unmet_need | Coefficient  std. err.      t    P>|t|     [95% conf. interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
  treat_post |  -.0292628   .9807927    -0.03   0.976    -2.053519    1.994994
             |
        Year |
       2010  |  -2.316977   .5290591    -4.38   0.000    -3.408901   -1.225053
       2011  |  -4.200977   .7285152    -5.77   0.000    -5.704558   -2.697395
       2012  |  -5.735806   .7975142    -7.19   0.000    -7.381795   -4.089818
       2013  |  -7.250636   .7834742    -9.25   0.000    -8.867647   -5.633625
       2014  |  -7.571124   .9516738    -7.96   0.000    -9.535283   -5.606966
       2015  |  -8.299124   1.142182    -7.27   0.000    -10.65647   -5.941777
       2016  |  -9.139124   1.172092    -7.80   0.000     -11.5582   -6.720045
       2017  |  -10.70712   1.413486    -7.57   0.000    -13.62442   -7.789834
       2018  |  -12.15472   1.342727    -9.05   0.000    -14.92598   -9.383472
             |
       _cons |     32.868   .6555206    50.14   0.000     31.51507    34.22093
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
     sigma_u |  13.118107
     sigma_e |  2.6254805
         rho |  .96148603   (fraction of variance due to u_i)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
```

B. Households Receiving Food Assistance (%)

```
Fixed-effects (within) regression               Number of obs     =        250
Group variable: dept_id                         Number of groups  =         25

R-squared:                                      Obs per group:
     Within  = 0.3582                                         min =         10
     Between = 0.0242                                         avg =       10.0
     Overall = 0.0673                                         max =         10

                                                F(10, 24)         =      43.64
corr(u_i, Xb) = 0.0236                          Prob > F          =     0.0000

                                 (Std. err. adjusted for 25 clusters in dept_id)
```

food_plan	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P>|t|	[95% conf.	interval]
treat_post	2.322558	1.584337	1.47	0.156	-.9473527	5.592469
Year						
2010	.022586	.5287207	0.04	0.966	-1.06864	1.113812
2011	-2.117414	.7849816	-2.70	0.013	-3.737536	-.4972916
2012	-4.294316	.9503816	-4.52	0.000	-6.255808	-2.332825
2013	-6.195219	.9797823	-6.32	0.000	-8.21739	-4.173047
2014	-6.245926	1.355451	-4.61	0.000	-9.043439	-3.448413
2015	-3.257926	1.466716	-2.22	0.036	-6.28508	-.2307717
2016	.4740744	1.546292	0.31	0.762	-2.717316	3.665464
2017	-.1699256	1.555923	-0.11	0.914	-3.381193	3.041342
2018	.2020744	1.500037	0.13	0.894	-2.89385	3.297999
_cons	37.208	.7094006	52.45	0.000	35.74387	38.67213
sigma_u	10.714124					
sigma_e	3.7013368					
rho	.89337969	(fraction of variance due to u_i)				

BELIEFS VS. REALITY: MACROECONOMIC INDICATORS AND MACROECONOMIC PERCEPTIONS

Austin Gienger

Abstract:
The interdependent relationship between public perception of the economy and measurable economic factors makes understanding the determinants of economic public opinion critical to an effective and comprehensive policy strategy. The leading understanding of what shapes economic perceptions is political party, where individuals who support the current party in power report more positive economic conditions. Previous research centers on non-economic determinants of aggregate economic perceptions, like political party and other biases. In this research, I focus on the economic determinants of economic perceptions, specifically unemployment, inflation, GDP, and the Federal Funds Rate (FFR) or commercial interest rate. I use a multilevel model to integrate individual-level survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) with national-level data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) to minimize error and increase statistical power given a small N years. Among the analyzed economic determinants of economic perception, unemployment had the strongest negative association, while inflation, GDP, and FFR did not have statistically significant relationships. In addition, my findings supported the past research indicating that the effect of economic conditions is not constant across contexts and that political party is an important determinant of economic perception.

Keywords: Economic Perception, Public Opinion, Unemployment, Economic Policy, Political Economy

Introduction:

Throughout 2025, the United States economy has been highly volatile, with international tariff changes, fluctuating bond yields, and inconsistent monetary policy (Murray 2025). Unfortunately, uncertain macroeconomic conditions directly affect the well-being of almost every American. From affording everyday necessities to borrowing money for a long-term investment, inflation, unemployment, and the interest rate strongly influence individuals' decisions (Di Tella et al. 2001). Reinforcing the importance of this relationship, not only do economic factors change individual behavior, but individual beliefs also impact economic conditions. Due to this reflexive relationship, public beliefs matter for policy because widespread confidence, or lack thereof, can translate into measurable booms and busts that affect the impact of monetary policy.

Learning more about which economic changes are most associated with shifts in aggregate public opinion of the economy can inform more effective economic policy decisions. This research evaluates which economic changes inspire the clearest swings in economic public sentiment, contributing to the literature that illustrates which policy changes could lead to the largest boosts in economic perception and, therefore, economic activity.

This investigation will focus on public perceptions of the macroeconomy. In the study of country-level public opinion, researchers primarily care about aggregate trends in the economy because micro-level changes may have different effects in different states or localities, making macroeconomic factors a more relevant area of study. However, macroeconomics is difficult to conceptualize and even harder to measure, making a strong relationship between rigorous empirical metrics and public perceptions difficult to expect (Blinder and Krueger 2004). Therefore, this research will analyze the association between widely accepted empirical measures of the macroeconomy and average public perceptions of the macroeconomy over time.

The prior research in this area details significant gaps between objective economic measures and political opinion. These gaps are often measured along party lines, detailing differences in factual beliefs based on party identification (Bartels 2002). In addition, the literature shows an inconsistent effect of economic characteristics on public opinion. For example, when unemployment decreases from 7% to 6%, economic perceptions may be reported as positive, whereas when unemployment increases from 3% to 4%, they may be reported as negative (Bisgaard 2015). Finally, the central goal of many past projects in this area has been to use the varying gaps between perceptions and empirical measures as a proxy for measuring political bias. These research projects were not designed to evaluate the association between economic perceptions and empirical economic conditions as the outcome of interest, in contrast to this analysis. Furthermore, many of the significant studies on these relationships are dated, not covering the last 10-15 years, another addition to the literature by this study.

To measure this topic, I took individual-level data from ANES about economic perception to calculate a 5-point scale, where responses could range from “the economy got much worse”, recorded as a 1, to “the economy stayed the same”, recorded as a 3, to “the economy got much better”, recorded as a 5. That result was then regressed in a multilevel model with individual-level predictors of political party and family income and group-level predictors of empirical measures of economic performance. The purpose of using a multilevel model is to aggregate across the individual-level and group-level characteristics in varying years, while minimizing error (Gelman 2007).

The results of this regression will be fixed effects, the impact across years, and random effects, allowed to vary by year, for each predictor to evaluate the average relationship between perceptions of the macroeconomy and empirical measures of the macroeconomy.

Literature Review:

Across the prior research on economic public opinion, researchers have found several factors that explain economic public opinion that are not the economy itself. The first factor in this category is partisanship, where individuals overwhelmingly support their party, regardless of reality. Secondly, there is a significant bias towards extremes, where individuals report large changes much more accurately, while small changes often go unnoticed. Despite these and other obscuring factors, the economic determinants of economic public opinion provide value, and this research will contribute to the literature by isolating the association between observable economic changes and economic public opinion.

The literature on the determinants of economic perception of the macroeconomy argues that supporters of the political party in power report more positive economic conditions. Firstly, the three key factors that contribute to a voter's perception of the economy from most to least important are partisanship, economic knowledge, and self-interest, defined collectively as their economic situation (Blinder and Krueger 2004). Given its impact on perceptions, much of the past research centers on the relationship between partisan bias and perceptions of objective events. Through a Bayesian updating framework, where individuals have a prior belief, take in a new piece of information, and produce a new belief by combining the two, the parallel partisan public opinion trends regarding unemployment levels between 1980 and 1988 show the bias of partisanship in perceptions of economic conditions (Bartels 2002). Under this model, one would expect that even when two individuals start in different places, if they trust the new information they receive, their beliefs will converge because each new piece of trusted information would move them closer together. Despite everyone having access to the same unemployment data, perceptions for Democrats and Republicans followed a parallel trend, not a convergence, allowing Bartels to conclude that perceptions must be impacted by bias. This combination of research points out the overlap between economic, political, and social perceptions, motivating this paper's research because it attempts to investigate the effect of economic conditions on public opinion of the economy. While this will be an imperfect isolation of economic determinants that cannot be interpreted as causal or complete, this study can provide a useful supplement to the role of political factors evaluated by all three papers because this project uses economic conditions as an explanatory variable, rather than a tool to investigate partisan bias.

In addition to partisan bias out of allegiance or identity connection with the party in power, the literature describes an even deeper political bias, including intentional rejection of facts and partisan beliefs about economic competence. This first stems from an empirical analysis that takes an even stronger position on bias than Blinder and Krueger by claiming that the reasons for the partisan gap in economic perception extend beyond disagreements over empirical facts or measurements and that partisans intentionally answer inaccurately if it contradicts their political preferences (Prior et al. 2015). This conclusion reinforces the importance of including partisanship in any formal analysis of economic perceptions. Building on the relevance of partisanship, Gerber and Huber used a narrow-window time series between October and November 2006 to show that partisans not only believe the economy is better when their party is in office, but that their party has a greater economic competency (Gerber and Huber 2010). This analysis offers value because there was very little change in material economic conditions, meaning that changes in economic perception can be more clearly attributed to the Democratic takeover of Congress, rather than an endogenous movement of partisan shift and the economy together. However, without applying this study to a wider range of time with economic and political fluctuations, it limits the external validity and applicability of these results, a limitation this research will address.

Furthermore, the literature shows that economic perceptions are useful in determining policy and can influence political and economic outcomes, making this research a relevant pursuit. Blinder and Krueger claim that public opinion of the economy affects economic and fiscal policy (Blinder and Krueger

2004). Under the Federal Reserve's charge of using policy to limit inflation, the theoretical basis for perception informing policy comes from the Phillips Curve, a tenet of macroeconomic theory that asserts that inflation is determined by economic conditions, shocks, and inflation expectations (Jones 2021). This idea is also supported by the relationship between economic perceptions and media coverage, where Soroka et al. posit a reverse-causality relationship between economic indicators and economic conditions. Indicators like inflation, GDP per capita, and unemployment improve because the public perceives a positive economy, spends more, and indirectly grows the economy (Soroka et al. 2015). This research justifies the importance of investigating the determinants of economic perception because economic perceptions change economic performance, which changes economic policy. While reverse causality can be an issue for statistical validity, this paper will use a lagged time-series design to circumvent that limitation by using empirical measures from the year before the backward-looking survey is taken.

Another clear contention of the literature on this topic is that the relationship between economic perceptions and economic conditions is not only obscured by omitted political and social variables, but it is also not linearly or constantly associated. The first dimension of this obscured relationship is that perceptions respond to changes in economic indicators, rather than absolute levels (Soroka et al. 2015). While the factors causing this dynamic are taken as exogenous in this analysis, to take these findings into account, this research will plot changes in economic indicators against public perceptions rather than absolute levels.

This non-linear relationship can also be understood through the variation in the relationship during extreme moments. To analyze these extreme moments, Bisgaard used an interrupted time series design to evaluate perception changes in Britain from 2004 to 2010, a time of extreme recession. In this paper, during cases of extreme objective economic evidence like sharp recessions, bias tended to shift from disagreements about perceptions of the economy to perceptions about who deserves the blame for the current state of the economy (Bisgaard 2015). Similarly, a broader analysis by Chzhen et.al modeled panel data across times of moderate economic fluctuation and large negative disruption (Chzhen et al. 2014). In this analysis, the authors also find that the further the economy fluctuates, especially in a negative direction, the smaller the role of partisan preferences in influencing economic perceptions. Therefore, when the economy is performing extremely poorly, economic perceptions are negatively associated with government approval, even after controlling for partisanship. However, under normal circumstances, the relationship becomes weaker and is endogenous to the effect of partisanship (Chzhen et al. 2014). This claim is supported further by a graph comparing the GDP per Capita growth with a public opinion survey on the top issue. In this survey, the authors find that when the economy is in crisis, a majority of voters cite it as a top issue, but when the economy is healthy, fewer people cite it as their top issue. These trends suggest that, in addition to fitting changes rather than absolute levels, this data may not be best fit by a linear regression, prompting the potential use of a random effects model to fit the variation of the data more closely.

Overall, there are two limitations that this paper centrally addresses to add to the literature on the determinants of economic perceptions. Firstly, across the research, but specifically in Bartels and Chzhen et.al, the explanatory variables are political determinants of economic perceptions (Chzhen et al. 2014). These determinants are statistically significant, but this paper will add a new perspective by focusing on explaining the economic determinants of economic perceptions, a useful supplement to the prior research. In addition, this paper will overcome an endogeneity problem for much of the research in this field outlined in Chzhen et.al regarding the omitted variables of exogenous or past government approval and unobserved characteristics that affect economic perception and political party identification (Chzhen et al. 2014). This research's design addresses both potential sources because each bias may be correlated to approval of the economy, but is not correlated to empirical economic metrics, meaning there will be no serious OVB in the results of the study.

Research Question:

To what extent do public perceptions of macroeconomic conditions relate to empirical measures of the macroeconomy? How well can measurable changes in economic indicators like GDP per capita, unemployment, inflation, and interest rates predict variations in public perception about the economy?

Hypothesis & Theoretical Framework:

Across each of the four economic indicators of interest, this analysis expects a clear association based on an economic theoretical framework. Firstly, GDP per capita is defined as the sum of all final goods and services in an economy in a given time frame divided by the population. All else equal, higher GDP per capita and GDP per capita growth rate, by definition, mean that individuals in the economy, on average, earn higher incomes (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) 2025). Given this definition, this analysis expects that GDP per capita will be positively associated with economic perceptions.

Secondly, the unemployment rate is defined as the percentage of the labor force who is unemployed (Federal Reserve Economic Data | FRED | St. Louis Fed 2025). Thus, when the unemployment rate or the growth rate of unemployment increases, fewer Americans actively seeking work will have jobs. Therefore, this analysis expects that the unemployment rate will be negatively associated with economic perceptions.

Thirdly, the inflation rate is defined as the price level of goods in the economy and is measured by the percentage change in the price of a defined basket of goods, excluding food and energy, called "Core PCE" (Federal Reserve Economic Data | FRED | St. Louis Fed 2025). Understanding this, when the inflation rate or the growth rate of inflation increases, the same income can purchase fewer goods, making households worse off. Hence, this analysis expects that the inflation rate will be negatively associated with economic perceptions.

Finally, interest rates can be defined as the cost of borrowing money. Interest rates can be proxied for by the federal funds rate (FFR) because the FFR is the Federal Reserve Bank's (FRB) target interest rate for the economy, and the FRB uses monetary policy tools to push interest rates towards that target (Federal Reserve Economic Data | FRED | St. Louis Fed 2025). When interest rates are higher, borrowing money is more expensive. This means that big purchases, like a house or a car, get harder for consumers, and investments, like hiring new workers, get harder for businesses. Following from those dynamics, this analysis expects that interest rates, proxied by FFR, will be negatively associated with economic perceptions.

While this research controls for personal income, a measure of economic and social status, and political bias, one potential intervening variable is financial or economic literacy. For individuals with higher economic literacy, their grasp of the impact of economic indicators on their lives may affect how they create perceptions. Even further, it may change how the given economic situation affects their individual well-being, because economically literate individuals may be better prepared for changes than the average individual. As this analysis was unable to collect data on financial literacy, this creates a limit on how applicable these findings are at an individual level. Understanding that limitation, these hypothesized relationships are expected to hold regardless of financial literacy, but the application of the conclusions should be focused on aggregate or average trends.

Empirical Plan:

This analysis will use survey data from the cumulative American National Election Survey study to analyze individual-level data on economic perceptions to aggregate them into national averages for each year. ANES uses a cumulative file of cross-sectional election studies and equal-probability sample designs. In addition, most of these studies are self-weighting, which means that the respondents do not need to be weighted to make the sample representative (ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File 2025). This dataset pulls from ANES time-series election studies, and the total unweighted cross-section N is 68,224. Given this large sample size, representative sample population, and cross-sectional design, ANES provides an unbiased and representative sample, ideally suited for an analysis over time like this study.

In addition, data on economic indicators, or group-level data, will come from a variety of sources, but primarily from the Federal Reserve Economic Database (FRED) (Federal Reserve Economic Data | FRED | St. Louis Fed 2025). The FRED database collects a wide range of economic indicators, including GDP per capita, unemployment, inflation, and more. The FRED takes data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) which uses national income accounting methodology to calculate gross domestic product, which includes measuring the total expenditure of all final purchases. For sampling of GDP per capita, the BEA uses economic census data and short-term indicators like retail sales, housing stats, and manufacturer reports (Pritzker et al. 2025). To calculate unemployment, FRED takes data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which uses exclusive BLS surveys of a representative population to estimate unemployment totals and rates (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) 2025). Finally, for inflation, the BEA uses its price indices, primarily the Core Personal Consumption Expenditure index, to track changes in the bundles of prices. Core PCE tracks the price of a bundle of average household goods, excluding food and energy, which are traditionally volatile expenses (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) 2025). For the Federal Funds Rate (FFR), the FRED simply reports its published FFR on its website. FFR is an important economic factor to measure, because it is the interest rate that large banks lend cash reserves to one another. When the FFR is high, banks prefer to hold onto their cash, making interest rates for loans more expensive and lowering economic activity, whereas when the FFR is low, interest rates go down and economic activity increases. These estimates generate valid estimates of macro-level empirical economic metrics through survey data, short-term indicators, and statistical aggregation, making these statistics valid for this study's use.

The scope of the data collection from these sources includes data from each presidential election year from 1984 to 2024. From ANES, this study will use data from a question on partisanship, a question on familial income, and a question on economic perception. Firstly, the Party ID question creates a 7-point scale, ranging from 1, strong Democrat, to 7, strong Republican. Secondly, the familial income question divides respondents into quintiles, with the lowest income as one and the highest income as 5. Thirdly, the economic perception question creates a 5-point scale, ranging from 1, the economy has gotten much better over the last year, to 5, the economy has gotten much worse over the last year. Regarding the group-level indicators, data were collected from the BEA and FRED on GDP per Capita, inflation rate, unemployment, and the Federal Funds Rate (FFR), a policy tool by the Federal Reserve. These group-level indicators were collected for January 1 of each presidential year from 1984 to 2024 to represent the state of the economy at the end of the year before the individual-level questions were asked.

After raw data collection, the data were cleaned using case-wise deletion. In addition, variables were recoded for ease of interpretation. Economic perception was reversed, so that the higher values represented higher economic perceptions, meaning the data now ranges from 1, the economy got much worse, to 5, the economy got much better. Party ID was also recoded to a “support for the president’s party” variable. This means that, in years when a Republican was president, a strong Democrat would receive a 1 and a strong Republican would receive a 7, whereas, in years when a Democrat was president, a strong Democrat would receive a 7 and a strong Republican would receive a 1. This change was made based on previous research asserting that support for the president’s party is associated with higher economic perceptions rather than a specific party. While party control of the legislature could impact this variable as well, following Bartels, the party of the president is a sufficient control for this analysis. In addition, regarding the group-level variables, this study calculated a rate of change from January 1 of the year before the election year to January 1 of the election year. These percentage changes in group-level variables will be used in the analysis, rather than the absolute values, based on the findings of Soroka et. al.

This study will use a multilevel regression to analyze these data. A multilevel regression allows this study to associate individual-level data from ANES with group-level data from the BEA with the least error. The benefit of a multilevel regression is that it balances between ignoring that these individual data come from different groups or years and pretending that these individual data do not come from different groups. To create this balance, the multilevel model allows intercepts and slopes of the relationship between individual-level and group-level variables to vary across years by modeling the most likely effect in a process called partial pooling. In addition to aggregating group-level and individual-level predictors, the multilevel model also offers more robust results from a smaller N. Given this sample only has 10 observations for the group-level predictors, the multilevel model is appropriate because its modeled effects of group-level effects allow it to “borrow” data between years, limiting the loss of validity from a low N. Therefore, this study will fit 4 multilevel models to evaluate the relationship between each economic indicator and economic perceptions. The input to these models will be the dependent variable of economic perception, the individual-level independent variables of party ID and income, and the group-level independent variable of the change in the given economic indicator, with one model fit for each economic indicator. An equation of the model is shown below:

$$\textbf{\textit{Economic\_Perception\_i\_j = Intercept\_fixed + Intercept\_j + Effect\_Party\_Support\_j}} \cdot \textbf{\textit{Party\_Support\_i\_j + Effect\_Income\_j}} \cdot \textbf{\textit{Income\_i\_j + (Effect\_Group\_Indicatort\_fixed + Effect\_Group\_Indicator\_j)}} \cdot \textbf{\textit{Group\_Indicator\_i + E\_i\_j}}$$

i = given individual, j = given year/group, E = error

Equation 1

This model relies on key statistical and structural assumptions, including temporal independence, non-linear effects of economic indicators, and normality of random effects. Firstly, temporal independence means that each year's economic perceptions are independent of every other year's economic perceptions. This assumption follows from the structure of the data, where each year is at least four years apart from other years, but this assumption does have limitations as economic perceptions may exhibit long-term trends. Secondly, for the fixed and random effects model to be appropriate, the effect of a given change in an economic indicator, like a one percent increase, must be different depending on the base level of that year. For example, the impact of a change from five to six percent unemployment must be different from the impact of a change from one to two percent unemployment. This assumption is supported by past research from Soroka et. al. Finally, the partial pooling of this model relies on the assumption that the random effects, i.e., the variations between years or the ***Effect_Group_Indicator_j*** in equation 1, are normally distributed. Expecting normality is theoretically consistent with the literature, specifically with Bisgaard, who expects clearer and larger relationships between economic indicators and perceptions during extreme times, which are rarer. This suggests that the random effects of non-extreme years, most of the sample, would be relatively small, whereas a few years with large booms or crises would have larger random effects, supporting a normal distribution. After running a Shapiro-Wilk normality test and a Q-Q normal visualization, each model failed to reject the null hypothesis of normality and matched relatively closely to a normal distribution visually. However, given the small sample, ruling out a non-normal distribution is difficult and may be a statistical limitation to this model.

The output of this model will be fixed effects that are directly estimated parameters across all groups and random effects, which show the variations between the groups or years. To interpret this regression, the primary outcome of interest will be the fixed effect coefficient of each group-level predictor, including unemployment, inflation, GDP per Capita, and the FFR on economic perception. While the fixed effects of party support and income can also be interpreted, their primary purpose is as controls, and their estimated associations are secondary. Based on the statistical significance and the direction of each model's estimate, this model can offer insight into the association between empirical macroeconomic measures and economic perceptions.

Analysis:

Summary Statistics:

The first step in conducting this analysis was to perform diagnostic statistics of each variable to ensure there were no unexpected errors in data collection or cleaning. The basic statistics of each variable in this study's analysis are shown below in Table 1:

	Min	Max	Mean	Std_Dev	N	Starting_Date	Source
Economic_Perceptions	1	5	2.6	1.21	31,916	1984	ANES

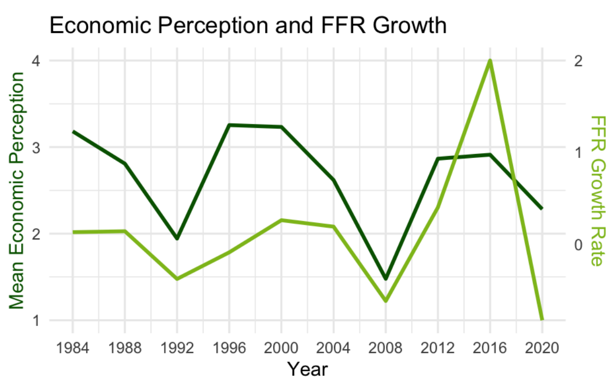
Party_ID	1	7	3.73	2.14	32,081	1984	ANES
Income_ID	1	5	2.83	1.16	30,273	1984	ANES
Inflation_Growth_Rate	-0.19	0.38	0.05	0.22	10	1984	BEA
Unemployment_Growth_Rate	-0.22	1.19	0.27	0.55	10	1984	BLS
FFR_Growth_Rate	-0.83	2	0.09	0.88	10	1984	FRED
GDP_Growth_Rate	-0.02	0.07	0.02	0.03	10	1984	BEA

Table 1

Notably, this table shows that the means and distributions of each of the three individual-level variables are nearly centered and have close to normal standard deviations. This suggests that the structure of these variables is normally distributed, following the assumptions of the model. In addition, there are slight variations in the number of observations for each individual-level variable, but this is to be expected under ANES's survey methodology, and the Ns are close to one another, suggesting limited sampling bias. Regarding the group-level variables, each mean and standard deviation is as expected.

Preliminary Analysis:

After general statistics, the next step was exploratory data analysis between each group-level indicator and average economic perceptions. These graphs are shown below, with the dark green line and the left y-axis representing average economic perceptions and the light green line and the right y-axis representing the group-level indicator.



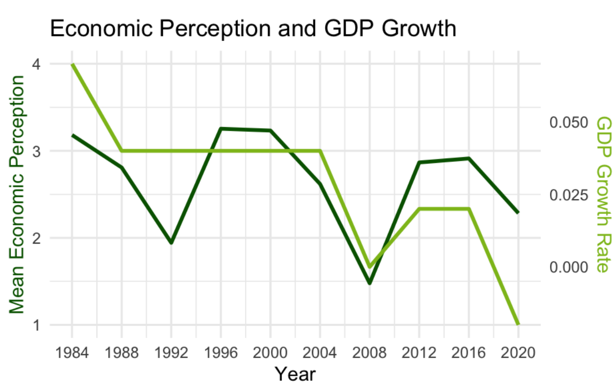


Figure 1

Figure 2

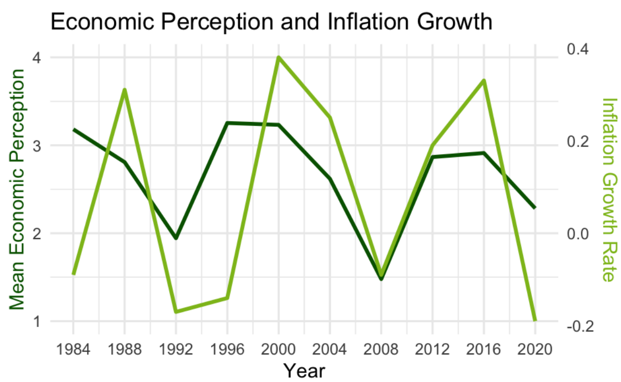


Figure 3 **Figure 4**

For each indicator, we would expect a specific direction of relationship, with unemployment and inflation being negatively associated, as higher unemployment indicates lower output, and higher inflation erodes purchasing power. We would expect GDP per Capita to be positively associated, as increases in GDP per Capita indicate economic growth. For FFR, we would also expect a positive relationship because the Federal Reserve uses its policy tools to increase rates when the economy is booming and decrease rates when the economy is in recession. For each of the first three indicators depicted, we see the hypothesized trend, at least loosely, with the clearest fit being unemployment, showing a clear negative relationship. However, regarding inflation, there does not seem to be a relationship with positive associations in some parts of the graph and negative associations in other parts. While these trendlines can provide cursory information, their findings are not robust and must be checked through more comprehensive modeling.

Multilevel Models:

Economic Perceptions:

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Support For Pres ID	**0.049***** **(0.003)**	**0.049***** **(0.003)**	**0.049***** **(0.003)**	**0.049***** **(0.003)**
Income ID	**0.034***** **(0.006)**	**0.034***** **(0.006)**	**0.034***** **(0.006)**	**0.034***** **(0.006)**
Inflation	1.444* (0.770)			
Unemployment		**-2.073**** **(0.765)**		
GDP per Capita			13.095* (6.707)	
FFR				0.039 (0.183)
Constant	2.108*** (0.236)	2.419*** (0.130)	1.992*** (0.273)	2.217*** (0.168)
Observations	29,873	29,873	29,873	29,873
Note:		*p<0.1 = *; p<0.05 = **; p<0.01 = ****		

Model 1

The coefficients in the model output above are the fixed effects of the multilevel regression, representing the association of each variable with economic perceptions across years. Complete regression outputs, including random effects, standard betas, and standard errors, can be seen in the appendix. Firstly, the two control variables are strongly significant in the expected direction. These control variables extend across all four models. Supporting the president's party is positively associated with economic perceptions, with each unit increase in support being associated with a 0.049 unit increase in predicted economic perception. For example, all else equal, a strong Democrat would report an economic perception 0.049 units higher, on average, than a weak Democrat during a year with a Democratic president. Similarly, all else equal, someone in the highest quintile of familial income would report an economic perception 0.034 units higher, on average, than someone with a familial income in the fourth quintile. Both control findings are consistent with the literature and are useful to help isolate the effect of the group-level variables.

Group-Level Outcomes of Interest:

The first multilevel model regressed inflation as the group-level variable and individual-level controls, finding a statistically insignificant positive association between inflation and economic perceptions. Firstly, a p-value of 0.098 is larger than 0.05, meaning we cannot confidently reject the null hypothesis of no effect. However, the large coefficient in the opposite direction than hypothesized, combined with the p-value under 0.1, offers a surprising result. In addition to the average fixed effect, the multilevel model adds other interesting results about inflation's relationship with economic perceptions through its random effects. First, the variance of the random slopes of the effect of inflation is 4.63, meaning that the standard deviation of the slopes is 2.15. Given that the coefficient estimate is 1.44, this creates a typical range of slopes from -2.86 to 5.74, a large range. Further, the covariance of the random effects of inflation is -0.99, a nearly perfect negative correlation between random intercepts and random slopes. This means that in years with higher perceptions, on average, the effect of inflation is closer to zero, whereas in years with low perceptions, the positive effect is stronger.

While this interpretation may seem counterintuitive, it could be explained by the Phillips Curve's posited relationship between short-run output and inflation. Under that frame, when the economy is struggling, the public may welcome higher inflation if it is accompanied by an economic boom and an increase in employment. While these random effects provide insight into how the impact of inflation changes based on economic conditions, this model shows that the effect of inflation significantly depends on economic context and cannot be confidently generalized across years.

After inflation, the next multilevel model regressed unemployment on economic perceptions with individual-level controls. The fixed effect of unemployment on economic perceptions was statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.027, and estimated that increases in unemployment are strongly associated with decreases in economic perceptions. In contrast with the model on inflation, this association matches the hypothesized trend as higher unemployment is associated with lower output and a weaker economy. Further, the effect of unemployment is extremely robust. Its standard beta is -0.92, compared to only 0.09 for support for the president's party and 0.03 for familial income. A standard beta describes the effect of a predictor in standard deviation units and is used for making strength comparisons between predictors. In addition, this regression, with random effects included, has a conditional R^2 of 0.751, showing that roughly 75% of the variation of economic perceptions can be explained by understanding the fixed and random effects of individual-level party and income and group-level unemployment. Given the combination of statistical significance, a relatively large standard beta coefficient, and a large conditional R^2 value, this regression shows that unemployment is crucial for studying economic perceptions and that higher unemployment is associated with lower economic perceptions.

Moving from the fixed effects, an analysis of the random effects of unemployment shows many similar trends to inflation, including a large variance of slopes and a strong covariance. The variance of the slopes estimated for the effect of unemployment across the 10 years of the model is 4.42. This variance suggests that in some years the effect of unemployment is strongly negative, similar to the general trend, and in some years the effect is much less negative or even positive. To understand how variance can be interpreted, the covariance, or the relationship between the average levels of perception and the effect of unemployment, provides value. For this regression, the covariance is 0.99, a strongly positive correlation, suggesting that years with higher average levels of perception have a significantly less negative effect than years with lower average levels of perception. Taking these two random effects together, the effect of employment is highly context-dependent, and it is more strongly negative in worse economic conditions. Therefore, this multilevel regression strongly supports the findings in

Chzhen et. al that the effects of empirical economic indicators are not constant across economic conditions, and they become stronger in moments of crisis.

Thirdly, GDP per Capita growth was positively associated with economic perceptions, but without statistical significance, as the p-value of 0.087 is greater than the 5% significance threshold. Through this marginal insignificance, the study cannot confidently conclude that GDP per Capita has a positive effect on economic perceptions based on the fixed effects. In addition to a weak association among the fixed effects, the variance of the slope of GDP per Capita is 14.48, and the standard deviation is roughly 3.8. Given that the estimated fixed effect slope of GDP per Capita could fall between -0.33 and 26.51 for the 95% confidence interval, the slope of GDP per Capita could plausibly fall anywhere from strongly positive to neutral to negative. Further enforcing the limited effect of GDP per Capita on perceptions, the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) is only 0.18. The ICC indicates the percentage of total variance in the regression explained by between-group or between-year differences. In this analysis, we expect high ICCs because we expect the variance to be explained by changing economic contexts, not weak associations between the chosen group-level predictor and economic perceptions. For example, the robust unemployment model has an ICC of 0.66. These fixed and random effects illustrate that GDP per Capita is not reliably associated with economic perceptions.

Finally, the multilevel model on the FFR shows that neither fixed nor random effects point to a clear association between FFR and economic perceptions. The statistical significance of the relationship between the FFR and economic perceptions in the fixed effects output has a p-value of 0.102, greater than the threshold for significance of $p < 0.05$. Further, the ICC is only 0.11, showing that the variance of the relationship is within-group or within-year, rather than being explained by changes in economic context. Unlike the other group-level predictors in this study, FFR is a policy choice by the Federal Reserve rather than a metric of the macroeconomy, calling into question why it should be included in this study. FFR was included in this analysis because the Federal Reserve uses some of the most sophisticated modeling tools to gauge the state of the economy. Therefore, FFR can serve as a proxy for other empirical macroeconomic tools. If the FFR increased, the macroeconomic tools of the Federal Reserve indicated that the economy was trending towards a boom, whereas if the FFR decreased, those tools indicated the economy was moving towards a recession. By not finding any significant relationship between the FFR and economic perceptions in fixed or random effects, this study suggests that more complex macroeconomic tools do not inherently have clearer relationships with economic perceptions.

General Model Findings of Interest:

Primarily, the high slope variance and high covariance in the inflation and unemployment models support the literature’s conclusions of inconsistent effects of macroeconomic indicators on perceptions across economic conditions. The high slope variances across the two models show that, based on the group or year, the effect of changes in the group-level indicator is not the same. The clearest explanation for this variance is that general economic conditions, outside of the modeled group-level indicator, are different. While this decreases the applicability of the fixed effects of this study, this result is consistent with the literature. In addition to this trend, the covariances of these models outline a potential shape of this varying relationship. The inflation and unemployment models both have extremely high covariances that are of opposite signs from the predicted beta. This suggests that, across the models, more negative economic conditions result in more robust relationships between the economic indicators and economic perceptions, another finding consistent with the literature. Finally, one factor that potentially contributed to these covariance and variance findings is the low number of group-level observations. In understanding the limitations of this study, the reduced statistical power of the low number of years for the models' fixed effects is limited by the multilevel model design, but it could have led to an overestimation of the true covariance and slope variance between years.

As well as trends that support the existing literature, the robust association of unemployment, the positive relationship of inflation, and the insignificant effect of inflation, GDP per Capita, and FFR are all contributions to the literature. The robust negative relationship between unemployment and economic perceptions shows that unemployment is more strongly associated with economic perceptions than any other tested metric. While this study cannot claim a causal relationship, this data shows that unemployment and the factors associated with it create conditions that are consistently related to lower economic perceptions. Secondly, the effect of inflation had a much weaker and different directional relationship than anticipated. In contrast with the media attention on inflation, inflation was not robustly associated with economic perceptions. Furthermore, inflation was positively associated with economic perception, not negatively as was expected, with stronger positive relationships in times of lower average economic perceptions. This result is the most surprising of the study and suggests that economic perceptions are more closely associated with output than inflation. One plausible explanation for this unexpected coefficient is that, in times of poor economic conditions, increased inflation is associated with increased output, which increases economic perceptions despite the higher inflation. Though inflation remains an important indicator of macroeconomic health, this study suggests it is unlikely to be significantly or negatively related to economic perceptions. Finally, the inability to confidently claim a significant relationship between FFR, GDP per Capita, and, to some extent, inflation and economic perceptions adds to the literature by showing that variation in these important signs of macroeconomic health cannot explain variations in average economic sentiment consistently over time.

Conclusion & Discussion:

This study evaluated the relationship between perceptions of the macroeconomy and empirical measures of macroeconomic performance. The goal of this research was to better understand which economic metrics best explained trends and variance in economic perceptions. This pursuit adds to the literature on this topic by creating a study design that attempts to isolate the role of economic indicators as the primary outcome of interest, while controlling for obscuring factors such as political party and familial income. In addition to academic contributions, this paper has political applicability for fiscal and monetary policy. The Phillips Curve and Investment-Savings curve show that higher inflation expectations result in higher inflation and lower economic output. This means that if policy can create consumer confidence and anchor expectations, economic booms will persist longer, and the economic recessions will be shorter and shallower. For monetary and fiscal policy to effectively inspire confidence, policymakers must know what economic conditions are associated with positive perceptions, the question this study contributes to.

In summary of these contributions, this investigation used a multilevel model to support the current literature on the inconsistent effect of economic metrics on economic perceptions and the stronger effect of metrics during times with worse general economic conditions, as shown by high random effect slope variance and strong covariance in the opposite direction of the estimated coefficient. In addition, this investigation contributed new findings by asserting the robust negative relationship between unemployment and economic perceptions, the positive association between inflation and economic perceptions in times with lower average economic perceptions, and the lack of confidence in the fixed effects of GDP per Capita, FFR, and inflation.

In addition to these contributions, this study also has limitations on its generalizability and must address its weaknesses. Firstly, this study does not claim that higher unemployment directly causes lower economic perceptions. Instead, it shows that times when the economy has higher unemployment are associated with lower economic perceptions on average. While this is likely due to the direct macroeconomic effects of higher levels of unemployment as stated in the theoretical framework, it could also be due to media exposure, the personal nature of unemployment, or variance in unemployment across sectors and geographies. In addition, this study controls for political party and economic status, but does not control for factors like financial literacy or education, both factors which could influence how an individual understands macroeconomic trends and forms their perceptions. Finally, the low number of years in the study limits the statistical power of the year-to-year estimations, including the covariance and slope random effect variance.

These limitations introduce multiple areas of future study, where research could contribute to defining a more specified or explicitly causal relationship. On an individual level, introducing data on financial literacy, education, happiness, and more could contribute to understanding how individual-level characteristics affect perception of the macroeconomy. In addition, another clear avenue of research would be to perform a similar study with more granular timing, using daily or monthly survey data and economic indicator changes, to make progress towards causality by showing that changes in perceptions occur within days of a given announcement. Thirdly, further research into how the media affects household information could help clarify a causal relationship between broader macroeconomic factors like unemployment and household perceptions by illuminating how households hear about those changes.

In conclusion, enacting fiscal and monetary policy to impact economic perceptions is complicated and not consistent. However, this investigation does offer two general trends that could influence policy to be more effective in the narrow goal of increasing average economic perceptions. Firstly, in times of economic downturn, fiscal and monetary policy should implement targeted policies that reduce unemployment. Secondly, economic perceptions are most closely associated with short-run output (unemployment), over macroeconomic stability (inflation), macroeconomic growth (GDP per Capita), and comprehensive macroeconomic diagnostics (FFR). While not a wholesale prescription for economic policy, this study provides useful direction for the economic conditions associated with economic perceptions.

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Appendix:

Individual-Level Data: ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File

Question	Answer
VCF0871: "Would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed the same or gotten worse?"* (IF BETTER/WORSE) "Would you say much better/worse or somewhat better/worse"	1. "Much better" 2. "Somewhat better" 3. "Stayed same" 4. "Somewhat worse" 5. "Much worse" "DK" on much Q – 8, "NA" on much Q – 9, "DK/NA" on better/worse Q – 0
VCF0301: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" (IF REP or DEM) "Would you call yourself a strong (REP/DEM) or a not very strong (REP/DEM)?" (IF INDEPENDENT, OTHER, NO PREFERENCE, OR DK) "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?"	1. Strong Democrat 2. Weak Democracy 3. Independent - Democrat 4. Independent - Independent 5. Independent - Republican 6. Weak Republican 7. Strong Republican DK or NA – 0, INAP. question not used
VCF0114: "Please look at this card/page/booklet and tell me the letter of the income group that includes the income of all members of your family living here in [previous year] before taxes. This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. (If uncertain) What would be your best guess?"**	NOTE: Ranges for these can be found for corresponding years in appendix. 1. 0 to 16 percentile 2. 17 to 34 percentile 3. 34 to 67 percentile 4. 68 to 95 percentile 5. 96 to 100 percentile "DK; NA; refused to answer; Pre IW" – 0 INAP. question not used

*Slight variation in question wording in 2000 and 1984.
**Slight variation in wording in 2012

Group-Level Data:

- BEA GDP per Capita
- BEA FFR
- BLS Unemployment
- BEA Inflation

Full Multilevel Model Outputs:

	Economic_Perceptions							
Predictors	Estimates	std. Error	std. Beta	standardized std. Error	CI	standardized CI	p	std. p
(Intercept)	2.11	0.24	-0.08	0.16	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	0.625
Support For Pres ID	0.05	0.00	0.09	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
Income ID	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
Inflation Growth Rate	1.44	0.77	0.24	0.13	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	0.098	0.110
Random Effects								
σ^2	1.22							
$\tau_{00\ Year}$	0.42							
$\tau_{11\ Year.Inflation\_Growth\_Rate}$	4.63							
$\rho_{01\ Year}$	-0.99							

ICC	0.30
N Year	10
Observations	29873
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.063 / 0.347

Inflation Rate:

	Economic_Perceptions							
Predictors	Estimates	std. Error	std. Beta	standardized std. Error	CI	standardized CI	p	std. p
(Intercept)	1.99	0.27	-0.08	0.17	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	0.621
Support For Pres ID	0.05	0.00	0.09	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
Income ID	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
GDP Growth Rate	13.09	6.71	0.29	0.16	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	0.087	0.114
Random Effects								

σ^2	1.22
$\tau_{00\ Year}$	0.30
$\tau_{11\ Year.GDP\_Growth\_Rate}$	14.48
$\rho_{01\ Year}$	-0.72
ICC	0.18
N $_{Year}$	10
Observations	29873
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.085 / 0.249

GDP per Capita:

FFR:

	Economic_Perceptions							
Predictors	Estimates	std. Error	std. Beta	standardized std. Error	CI	standardized CI	p	std. p
(Intercept)	2.22	0.17	-0.02	0.14	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	0.903

Support For Pres ID	0.05	0.00	0.09	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
Income ID	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
FFR Growth Rate	0.34	0.18	0.27	0.15	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	0.102	0.113
Random Effects								
σ^2	1.22							
$\tau_{00\ \mathrm{Year}}$	0.16							
$\tau_{11\ \mathrm{Year.FFR}}$	0.00							
$\rho_{01\ \mathrm{Year}}$	0.82							
ICC	0.11							
N_{Year}	10							
Observations	29873							
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.073 / 0.178							

Unemployment Rate:

	Economic_Perceptions							
Predictors	Estimates	std. Error	std. Beta	standardized std. Error	CI	standardized CI	p	std. p
(Intercept)	2.42	0.13	-0.37	0.32	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	0.247
Support For Pres ID	0.05	0.00	0.09	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
Income ID	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	<0.001	<0.001
Unemp. Growth Rate	-2.07	0.76	-0.92	0.43	-Inf – Inf	-Inf – Inf	0.027	0.065
Random Effects								
σ^2	1.22							
$\tau_{00\ \text{Year}}$	0.15							
$\tau_{11\ \text{Year.Unemployment\_Growth\_Rate}}$	4.42							
$\rho_{01\ \text{Year}}$	0.99							
ICC	0.66							
N_{Year}	10							
Observations	29873							

Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.273 / 0.751

HISTORIC STRUGGLES, MODERN ECHOES: CIVIL RIGHTS FROM THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL TO THE STREETS OF KENOSHA, WISCONSIN

Abigail L. Nosalik

Abstract:

This research explores pivotal moments from the 1963 March on Washington held in Washington, D.C., on August 28th, 1963, and the 2020 racial justice protests held in Kenosha, Wisconsin, between August 23rd and September 1st, 2020. Through archival research, interviews, and qualitative analysis, this research explores how individuals – both protest participants and police officers – interpret their roles in shaping social change, and how these understandings shape their collective actions and goals. By drawing on literature surrounding collective identity, intersectionality, protester violence, and policing, this research investigates how participants define themselves as activists, moral witnesses, or community defenders and how these identities influence the tactics, narratives, and outcomes of each movement. Despite differences in historical, political, and technological contexts, both movements demonstrate a shared reliance on frameworks of moral urgency and community solidarity. This paper also highlights the evolving relationship between activism and law enforcement, analyzing how institutional culture and public perception shape the activism environment. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how activism is experienced and enacted across generations, while addressing a critical gap in literature by foregrounding the emotional and cultural infrastructures that sustain social movements, which have often been overlooked yet are essential for the resilience and continuity of collective action.

Introduction:

When Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back by a police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on August 23, 2020, the city erupted in protests and unrest that exposed deep racial divides and long-standing inequities. The immediate aftermath included nightly demonstrations met with heavy police presence, high-profile militia involvement, and violent confrontations that captured national attention. Yet, beneath this turmoil lay a community grappling with complex histories of systemic racism, policing disparities, and contested visions of justice. Throughout American history, moments of profound social demonstration have catalyzed powerful movements for racial justice, calling attention to systemic inequalities and prompting calls for sweeping reform. Two such movements and specific demonstrations are the 1963 March on Washington during the Civil Rights Movement, and the 2020 racial justice protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, represent both continuity and change in the struggle for racial equity in the United States. Separated by nearly six decades, these movements are united by their commitment to confronting racial injustice and by the individuals who, driven by a sense of moral urgency, took to the streets to demand change.

This research examines how participants across generations – activists and law enforcement alike – interpret their roles and responsibilities in racial justice movements, and how these interpretations shape the evolution of activism and social transformation. By exploring their motivations, identities, and narratives, this research seeks to uncover how individual and collective understandings of activism influence movement strategies, goals, and solidarities. Central questions include how participants view themselves – as revolutionaries, moral witnesses, community defenders, or agents of reform – and what it means to be part of history, whether as activists or police officers. This paper situates these questions within existing literature on collective identity and intersectionality, policing and protest tactics, and protest-related violence. Using data sources such as participant interviews and archival research from institutions like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian, the study applies a focused analytical approach to engage deeply with these sources.

Despite occurring in vastly different historical, political, and technological contexts, participants in both the 1963 March on Washington and the 2020 Kenosha protests draw on shared frameworks of identity, moral responsibility, and community solidarity to define their roles in advancing social change. These understandings not only inform the specific tactics and collective goals of each movement, but also reveal how activism is shaped by generational memory, personality, and the broader cultural narratives surrounding race and justice in America. Furthermore, the perceptions and actions of police officers in both contexts – shaped by institutional norms, political pressures, and personal beliefs – play a critical role in shaping the atmosphere of protest, the escalation and de-escalation of conflict, and the public narrative around justice, order, and legitimacy.

By engaging in a comparative analysis of these two movements, as well as conducting interviews to gain firsthand accounts from not only protest participants but police officers and law enforcement as well, this research traces both the evolution of protest tactics and movement rhetoric and investigates the deeper cultural and emotional frameworks that sustain collective action. This research ultimately contributes to a broader understanding of how activists across generations interpret their responsibility in struggles for justice and how these interpretations influence social transformation itself. Crucially, existing scholarship has paid limited attention to the emotional and cultural infrastructures that sustain such cross-generational activism. This gap is significant because these infrastructures function as vital connective tissues that enable movements to maintain resilience, adapt to changing contexts, and foster solidarity across divergent participant experiences. By integrating these often-overlooked affective and cultural dimensions into the analysis, this research offers new insights into how activist identities and commitments are evolving over time, thereby bridging the divide between generational knowledge and contemporary praxis within social movements.

Research Context:

The following research highlights two significant historical events regarding racial justice: the 1963 March on Washington in Washington, D.C., and the 2020 racial justice protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Centered in the two protests is the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), which formally emerged in 2013, but whose core ideas have long been present for Americans fighting for racial equality. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an organization that came to the forefront in 2020 following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and remained active in the protests in Kenosha.

1963 March on Washington

The 1963 March on Washington was a landmark event for the Civil Rights Movement, held on August 28th, 1963, with over 250,000 people participating. Held with the original title "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom", the event focused on employment discrimination, civil rights abuses against African Americans, Latinos, and other disenfranchised groups (National Park Service 2017). It occurred during a pivotal moment in American history, against the backdrop of ongoing racial segregation, rampant voter suppression in the South, and increasing violence against civil rights activists. It was also a show of support for the Civil Rights Act that the Kennedy Administration was attempting to pass through Congress, a bill that aimed to dismantle segregation and ensure voting rights, but faced considerable opposition from Southern legislators. This display of activism took place on the National Mall, with a main meeting point being the Lincoln Memorial; a deliberate choice made to invoke former President Abraham Lincoln's legacy of emancipation. The march was a collaborative effort, but the original idea came from A. Philip Randolph, a labor organizer and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Negro American Labor Council (NALC). Randolph had a long history of organizing for racial justice, including a planned (but ultimately canceled) 1941 march to pressure former President Franklin D. Roosevelt into banning discrimination in defense industries. The 1963 March was organized in less than three months. The day-to-day planning was handed off to a man named Bayard Rustin, who essentially planned everything, from crowd control using nonviolent techniques and the setup of porta-potties for participants. There were many concerns about violence in the city, with the D.C. police force mobilizing 5,900 officers for the march, and the government mobilizing an additional 6,000 soldiers. President Kennedy believed that any major problems could undo the civil rights bill making its way through Congress. In the end, there were zero incidents reported by police. The march was a peaceful occasion, and the words spoken that day range from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and speeches from Whitney Young (head of the National Urban League) and John Lewis (the 23 year old chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and ultimately a Congressman for Georgia), whose remarks called for more urgent and radical change. The march was a collaboration of all Americans, marching for their civil rights and to reaffirm protections in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The success of the March on Washington helped build crucial momentum that ultimately led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, reshaping American society for generations to follow.

Kenosha, Wisconsin Protests

On August 23rd, 2020, Kenosha Police were called to the 2800 block of 40th Street in Kenosha, Wisconsin, after a female caller reported her boyfriend was present and was not allowed to be on the premises. A white officer with the Kenosha Police Department shot Jacob Blake, a Black man, in the back, resulting in his paralyzation. Blake was tasered, then shot, after he picked up a knife and opened the door to a SUV he had been using on the premises. Protests then erupted in the city of Kenosha, Wisconsin. More than 40 different local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies were dispatched to Kenosha beginning on the night of August 23rd. A state of emergency was declared in Kenosha County starting at 10:15 p.m. on August 23rd. Police began using tear gas and rubber bullets in an attempt to disperse violent crowds; at least three garbage trucks and the Kenosha trolley were set on fire. By 2:30 a.m., a truck at a used car dealership was lit on fire; the fire then spread to over 100 other cars. On the second day, August 24th, many peaceful demonstrations were held during the day; by nightfall, a curfew of 8 p.m. was instituted, and protesters ripped a door off the hinges of the Public Safety Building in an attempt to enter. Firefighters worked into the morning of August 25th attempting to put out fires at local businesses and the probation and parole office, but were often attacked and blocked by protesters.

By Day 3, most of the damage was caused by people with no intent to protest and by those who were not from Kenosha County. At 1:42 p.m. on August 25th, an email from the FBI confirmed that conflicting ideologies of protestors and armed civilians and militia groups who planned to attend the protest could be a “flashpoint for violence” (ACLU 2021). That night, a protester by the name of Kyle Rittenhouse would shoot and kill two people in the streets of Kenosha. Law enforcement erected a fence to protect the Kenosha County courthouse; the Kenosha fire chief would later state that there were 34 active fires that night. The National Guard was deployed, with the city being described as “under attack”. Protests continued daily through August 29th, with groups chanting “7 bullets, 7 days”. At least 250 protest-related arrests were made, and of these, 35 were Kenosha residents. Kenosha Police Officers were targeted throughout these days; one being struck in the head directly with a brick, and others having fireworks and improvised explosives shot at them, along with frozen water bottles and rocks being used as weapons. Civilians lined the streets with assault style rifles. More than 100 businesses were damaged during the civil unrest in Kenosha, and more than 40 businesses were burned to the ground. Estimates of damages reached as high as $50 million (McAdams 2020). On January 5th, 2021, Kenosha County District Attorney, Michael Graveley, announced that no criminal charges would be filed against the officer who shot Jacob Blake, any other officers, or Blake himself. The Kenosha protests marked a flashpoint for the Black Lives Matter movement, which gained further traction through the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June 2020.

Black Lives Matter Movement

The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) “imagines a world where Black people across the diaspora thrive, experience joy, and are not defined by their struggles…in pursuing liberation, we envision a future fully divested from police, prisons, and all punishment paradigms and which invests in justice, joy, and culture” (Black Lives Matter 2024). Founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, BLM supports organizations, funds policy and abolitionist leaders, and invests millions in sustaining Black communities and movement-building efforts. Crucially, BLM serves as an analytical framework for understanding the 2020 Kenosha protests, shaping the interpretive lens through which participant motivations, collective identities, and strategies are examined. The movement’s influence is evident in the widespread demonstrations following George Floyd’s murder and the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, linking localized protests to a broader, ongoing struggle for racial justice and systemic change. Thus, rather than merely describing the Kenosha protests, this research uses BLM as a category to analyze how the protests fit within, and contribute to, the evolving discourse and praxis of the Black liberation movement. BLM's contemporary goals of immediate improvements for Black livelihood and transformative justice frame the analytical exploration of protest dynamics and collective action in this context.

Potential Timing and Intervening Variables

While the 1963 March on Washington and the 2020 Kenosha protests share striking thematic and ideological continuities, these events are separated by nearly six decades and distinct geographical, political, and social contexts that merit careful consideration. The 1963 march unfolded during a period of emerging civil rights mobilization, amid Cold War anxieties, a less polarized media environment, and a political landscape focused on legislative reform. In contrast, the 2020 protests took place in an era marked by hyperconnectivity, social media proliferation, increased political polarization, and heightened surveillance and militarization of law enforcement. Yet even when controlling for these contextual differences, core variables of identity, moral urgency, and community solidarity persistently shape activist and policing roles. This persistence underscores the durability of social movement frameworks in navigating shifting historical landscapes and highlights the value of cross-generational analysis for revealing both change and continuity in racial justice activism.

While this research does not attempt to statistically control for intervening variables, it explicitly situated participant interpretations of protest within several key contextual factors that shape both activism and policing. These intervening variables include the broader political climate (Cold War civil rights era versus a highly polarized, post 9/11 and post Ferguson context), the media and communication environment (limited broadcast coverage versus hyperconnected social media ecosystems), local and national policing practices (community oriented and federally monitored responses versus increasingly militarized protest policing), and the geographical and demographic differences between Washington, D.C., and Kenosha, Wisconsin. By foregrounding these contextual conditions, the analysis treats them as structuring forces that mediate how activists and police understand their roles and responsibilities, allowing for a more cautious and nuanced comparison of identity and moral urgency across the 1963 and 2020 cases. Comparisons across the two cases are therefore framed as interpretive rather than causal, with intervening variables used to contextualize, rather than erase, key differences in opportunity structures and constraints.

Literature Review:

Collective Identity and Intersectionality

Scholarship on collective identity and intersectionality reveals how activists' self-conceptions and overlapping social positions shape their participation in social movements. For example, Polletta and Jasper (2001) define collective identity as a shared sense of "we-ness," rooted in common grievances, which enables individuals to see their personal struggles as part of a broader structural problem. Additionally, they further characterize collective identity as an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a larger community, category, practice, or institution. This dynamic process was clearly evident in the 1963 March on Washington, where organizers cultivated unity among diverse civil rights groups and individuals. Bullard (1994), for instance, emphasizes how the March's leadership forged a coalition that transcended organizational boundaries, reinforcing nonviolence and a shared vision for racial justice.

Similarly, the 2020 racial justice protests, especially following George Floyd's murder, explicitly embraced intersectionality. Fisher and Rouse (2022) found that intersectionality formed a core feature of this movement, supported by survey data showing participants described their motivations through overlapping identities and solidarities. Moreover, the presence of intersectional frames broadened the movement's appeal across the U.S. and globally. Kann et al. (2023) further argue that protesters who identified with the collective 'we' reported stronger feelings of empowerment and efficacy. In the study of Kenosha protests, for example, collective identity extended beyond shared grievances to a sense of obligation to collaborate with other marginalized groups united by systemic marginalization.

Furthermore, intersectionality functions broadly as a source of movement power, fostering inclusivity that strengthens organizational resilience. As Tormos-Aponte (2019) notes, movements recognizing multiple participant identities are better able to address complex oppressions and sustain activism over time. Yet, scholars like Horowitz (2017) highlight that debates over movement boundaries and values – seen in both 1963 and 2020 – reveal that grounding activist identity often involves contestation and negotiation. Additionally, Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg (2020) suggest that participation decisions are heavily shaped by the salience of group identity and collective action's perceived legitimacy. Altogether, a strong collective identity forged amid external threats or opportunities emerges as a key predictor of sustained mobilization and movement success.

Policing

Turning to policing, the relationship between protest movements and law enforcement was a defining feature in both historical and contemporary contexts. For example, Bullard (1994) discusses how the 1963 March was coordinated with law enforcement and the federal government to prevent violence, reflecting both reassurance and the threat of repression. The March's commitment to nonviolence was a strategic response to anticipated police scrutiny, exemplifying somewhat effective community policing, which seeks cooperative problem-solving between police and communities (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1994). However, this approach often faces implementation challenges in communities of color.

By contrast, Stott et al. (2022) reveal that police-crowd interaction dynamics during the 2020 protests frequently escalated tensions, with police use of force perceived as antagonistic, particularly in Kenosha. Kann et al. (2023) emphasize how experiences of repression and solidarity amid police violence reinforce protesters' shared purpose and commitment, intensifying the protest's original message. Thus, adversarial relations with law enforcement remain central to protest narratives and goals both historically and today.

Protester Violence

The question of violence versus nonviolence has been central to both historical and contemporary protest movements. The March on Washington was planned to avoid any incident that could be construed as violent, reflecting both a principled commitment to nonviolence and a strategic calculation to win public sympathy (Bullard 1994). Organizers trained marshals and participants in nonviolent discipline, and the event ultimately concluded without any major incident.

Especially seen in the 2020 Kenosha protests, incidents of police violence were often associated with increases in protester turnout and in some cases, retaliatory violence (Steinert-Threlkeld et. al 2021). Protester violence is more likely to occur following visible acts of police aggression, which suggests a feedback loop between repression and resistance. The use of force by police, particularly when perceived as illegitimate, can undermine crowd cooperation and further escalate disorder (Stott et. al 2022). The shooting of Jacob Blake and the subsequent police actions often intensified protest anger, and in some cases, led to property destruction and confrontations with law enforcement.

Additional Synthesis

Across both eras, collective identity – rooted in shared grievances and increasingly intersectional solidarities – has been a driving force in mobilization protest. The evolution from the relatively unified, nonviolent discipline of the 1963 March on Washington to the more intersectional, violent nature of the 2020 Kenosha protests reflects changes in both movement strategy and broader social context. Policing has remained a central concern, shaping both the tactics of protestors and the public's perception of movements. While community policing was often promoted as a solution, its inconsistent application and the widely seen persistence of aggressive responses to protest have continued to fuel cycles of escalation. Further, the interplay of protester violence remains a key factor in protest dynamics, where police aggression often galvanized further protest and at times, protester violence.

Expectations for Research:

Focusing on understanding meaning rather than establishing causality, this research expects participants to highlight how their sense of identity, both personal and collective, shapes their engagement and their interpretation of protest. The literature suggests that identity is central to why individuals join and sustain activism, with participants in previous studies and research often describing their involvement in terms of belonging to a larger group and adopting shared grievances. Interviewees, both participants and police officers, are likely to reflect on how their roles, group connections, and sense of obligation to others inform their actions and goals, revealing the evolving ways that collective identity motivates and defines protest participation, from both sides of the coin. I anticipate identity to emerge as a core theme in how participants, protesters, and police officers make sense of their experience and their resulting impact on social change.

Data Sources and Methods of Data Generation:

1963 March on Washington – Archival Research

To ensure methodological rigor in understanding the historical context and participant perspectives of the 1963 March on Washington, this research employed a systematic archival research approach grounded in best practices for historical qualitative inquiry. Given the impossibility of interviewing those present nearly six decades ago, data collection prioritized triangulation across multiple types of primary sources, including archival documents, oral histories, and secondary literature, to reconstruct a robust and multifaceted narrative of the event (Mohr and Ventresca 2002). Key artifacts, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Official Program for the March, were selected not merely for their relevance but also for their foundational legal and organizational significance, which provided vital contextual grounding for analysis. Oral histories and interviews accessed through reputable archives like the Library of Congress and Washington University were chosen based on criteria including participant proximity to the event, role significance, and availability of detailed firsthand accounts. This ensured both depth and representativeness in capturing diverse activist perspectives. The process of source comparison and cross-validation throughout data collection enhanced the credibility and confirmability of findings, mitigating limitations posed by historical distance, memory biases, and retrospective reinterpretation.

A key example, Gloria Hayes Richardson, recognized as one of the six “Negro Women Fighters for Freedom,” vividly recalled the marginalization of women leaders during the March, noting, “We were honored to be on the stage but not allowed full speeches.” This experience highlights the gendered limitations within the movement structure despite women’s critical organizing roles and speaks to broader intersectional dynamics shaping collective identity. Courtland Cox, responsible for coordinating transportation and revising John Lewis’s speech, emphasized the logistical complexity and grassroots coordination behind the scenes. The sisters Dorie Ann and Joyce Ladner, active in Mississippi’s voter registration efforts and SNCC activism, illustrated the fierce regional struggles preceding the March and the deep community empowerment driving participation. Meanwhile, Bayard Rustin, chief organizer and strategic mastermind behind the March, underscored the challenge of managing coalition-building and maintaining disciplined nonviolence across diverse groups.

By situating these varied narratives alongside pertinent legislative and programmatic documents, this multi-source approach triangulates participant accounts with historical artifacts, enhancing the validity of interpretations. The method allows for a nuanced understanding of how collective action unfolded amid layered social, legal, and political forces. This foundation supports the analysis of evolving protester self-understandings and social movement dynamics across time, capturing not only the grand organizational structure but also the personal experiences that shaped the March on Washington’s enduring legacy. Additionally, I was able to consult numerous resources that had artifacts from 1963, including the JFK Library Archives, the Smithsonian, CBS News Coverage of the 1963 March on Washington, a recording of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech, the official copy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the official copy of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Official Program for the 1963 March on Washington from the National Archives. I selected these sources by researching which artifacts were most integral for and following the March on Washington, and was able to conclude on these resources. I then worked through each of these interviews, artifacts, oral histories, and other sources and analyzed them by critical reflection and relating them to collective action and intersectionality.

2020 Racial Justice Protests in Kenosha - Interviews and Surveys

To critically reflect on the 2020 protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, I conducted interviews amongst police officers, community activists, and protest participants. I also sent out a survey with the same questions to three (3) individuals, of which I received one (1) response. In terms of interviews, I was able to conduct seven (7) interviews, of which five (5) were police officers who served during the time of the 2020 protests. The other two (2) individuals were a community activist and participant, and the other asked to remain anonymous in terms of their position in 2020. The questions I asked in the interviews are listed fully in the Appendix section of this paper, and varied based off of police officer versus participant, but most notable questions are listed below:

- Describe the 2020 events/protests in a few words.
- Did you, at any point during the events of 2020, feel like your life personally was in danger?
- Did you or anyone you know sustain any injuries during August 2020, short-term or long-term?
- Did you personally feel like the connotation of your role was interpreted differently by others?
- What do you see as the most important role of police in the community? (Only asked to police)
- How do you feel about the department's efforts to build trust with the community, prior to 2020 and currently? (Only asked to police)
- What motivated you to participate in the 2020 protests in Kenosha? (Only asked to participants)
- How did the events that led to the protests resonate with your personal experiences or understanding of racial injustice? (Only asked to participants)
- How do you define social change? (Only asked to participants)
- How do you see your participation in the protests as contributing or not contributing to social change? (Only asked to participants)

I was able to interview five police officers, including my father, Joseph Nosalik. My father was able to put me in contact with the officers, who either served for the Kenosha Police Department or the Kenosha County Sheriff's Department in August 2020. My father was also able to put me in contact with the anonymous individual, as well as Lawrence Kirby, a community activist and participant in the 2020 protests. Mr. Kirby was able to put me in contact further with two individuals whom I sent the survey to, but I did not receive a response from either. I reached out to a family friend, Lisa O'Reilly, who protested in the 2020 protests, and I received a survey response from her. When conducting these interviews, I took notes via my laptop and was able to write down completed responses and direct quotations when the officers and individuals answered the questions I had. I asked the same questions to each officer and participant. To reflect and analyze upon these interviews, I was able to pull out the most notable direct quotations regarding the questions that focused the most on creating social change and how the individuals felt about their participation in the protests, as everyone participated in some way, whether that be as an officer or a community member. These interviews were conducted in an informal manner, either via telephone or Google Meet. The completed list of interviews is listed below, along with specific dates:

- <u>Officers:</u>

- Joseph Nosalik, Kenosha Police Department, April 6, 2025
- Aaron Dilhoff, Kenosha Police Department, April 10, 2025

- John Doe, Kenosha County Sheriff's Department, April 17, 2025
- Colin Coultrip, Kenosha County Sheriff’s Department, April 17, 2025 - Joe Zarletti, anonymous organization, April 19, 2025

- Individuals:

- Lawrence Kirby, March 29, 2025
- John Doe 2, anonymous organization represented, April 6, 2025
- Lisa O’Reilly, survey, April 15, 2025

Data Analysis – 1963 and 2020

This research employed a rigorous qualitative methodology grounded in established scholarly practices to analyze selected data from extensive archival and interview sources. The process of choosing specific quotations involved a systematic approach where excerpts were selected based on their representativeness, richness of context, and ability to illuminate key themes central to the research questions. By focusing on one to five quotes per source, the analysis balances depth and breadth, allowing for detailed interpretation while maintaining manageability across a large and diverse dataset. This selective approach aligns with thematic and discourse analytic methodologies that prioritize meaningful, contextually situated data over exhaustive coding (Braun and Clarke 2006). Moreover, the selection criteria was reflective, informed by the evolving analytical framework that foregrounds emotional and cultural infrastructures and cross-generational dynamics. Explicitly grounding these methodological choices in qualitative research literature enhances transparency and rigor, ensuring that the findings are both credible and analytically rich.

The data processing and analysis followed a structured, iterative approach designed to move from raw archival and interview materials to clearly defined themes and interpretations. All archival documents, oral histories, and interview notes were first converted into textual form, then read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content and contextual nuances. During these readings, key passages were highlighted and assigned preliminary labels related to identity, moral responsibility, policing practices, protest tactics, and emotional responses. These preliminary labels were then refined into a set of analytical codes, which were systematically applied across materials from both the 1963 March on Washington and the 2020 Kenosha protests. This process functioned as the primary form of data processing and manipulation, transforming large amounts of unstructured text into organized, comparable units of meaning. Following initial coding, the coded excerpts were organized into thematic groupings and matrices to facilitate cross-case and cross-group comparison. Codes were compared across different participant categories (police officers, activists/community members) and across the two time periods to identify convergences and divergences in how individuals understood their roles, responsibilities, and experiences of protest. Throughout this process, analytic memos were used to document emerging patterns, contradictions, and questions, which guided subsequent rounds of recoding and theme refinement. This iterative movement between data, codes, and emerging interpretations allowed the analysis to foreground the emotional and cultural infrastructures of activism while maintaining a clear, systematic link between empirical material and the findings presented.

The discourse analysis methodology employed in this research is primarily rooted in Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by scholar Ruth Wodak. CDA views language as a form of social practice that is embedded within and reflective of power relations and ideologies (Wodak 2011). This methodological framework enables the examination of how discourse constructs and maintains social identities, relationships, and power structures, which is particularly relevant for analyzing social movements engaged in contesting inequality and oppression. Specifically, this research uses CDA to analyze language by identifying linguistic features, rhetorical strategies, and narrative structures that reveal underlying ideologies and power dynamics within both the 1963 March on Washington and the 2020 Kenosha protests. By interpreting the selected quotations from archival documents, oral histories, and media artifacts through this lens, the study uncovers how participants construct their roles, legitimacies, and collective identities within contentious political contexts. CDA's emphasis on the situational, institutional, and historical contexts of language use supports interpreting how meanings are socially negotiated and contested over time.

Ethical Considerations:

While in the process of completing research, there were a few ethical issues to consider. Firstly, this is a topic that is very close to home for me, in more ways than one. The protests in Kenosha took place in my home city, and my father was a Kenosha Police Officer during the 2020 events. Disclosing this information to people I wished to interview was integral, as I wanted to ensure that they knew fully who I was and what I was trying to learn, and why.

Additionally, an ethical consideration I discovered while conducting research is participants being quoted. Still to this day, there are court cases pending both locally, statewide, and nationally, regarding the events in 2020. This meant that many individuals were unable to disclose their personal identifiable information for usage in the paper, and were also unable to offer direct quotations. At the beginning of every participant interview, and at the top of the survey that was sent to participants, the question, "Do you consent to be directly quoted or would you prefer to remain anonymous?" was asked. This was to ensure no further ethical dilemmas would arise out of this situation.

Positionality:

As with all qualitative research, the lens through which data is gathered, interpreted, and presented is shaped by the positionality of the researcher. Positionality refers to the social and political context that influences a researcher's identity. In this research, examining how participants from the 1963 March on Washington and the 2020 racial justice protests in Kenosha understand their roles in shaping social change requires not only critical reflection on historical and contemporary activism, but also a deep awareness of how my own identity and experiences influence the research process.

This research acknowledges several limitations rooted in my social positionality that influenced both data collection and analytical framework. As a white female and the daughter of a Kenosha police officer, I entered this work with simultaneous commitments to social justice and nuanced awareness of my privileges and potential biases. This positionality shaped the questions I asked and the interpretive lens I applied, knowing that lived experience of the 2020 Kenosha protests granted me contextual insight, yet also carried risks of subjective interpretation and partiality. It required a conscious effort to center participant voices without over-imposing my own narratives, consistent with reflexive qualitative research ethics that emphasize transparency and researcher positionality.

Conversely, analyzing the 1963 March on Washington involved historical distance and reliance on archival and secondary sources, where I lack familial or personal connection. This distance influenced my analytical framework by necessitating a more cautious approach to representation. Embracing a situated ethics framework rather than a "neutral observer" stance, I aimed to honor the complexity and contestation within social movement narratives, understanding that all representation is inherently interpretive and shaped by power dynamics. These limitations pressed me to adopt a rigorous, reflexive methodological posture that actively recognizes and addresses positionality and ethical responsibilities throughout the research process. It reinforced the importance of maintaining a critical stance toward interpretive authority, ensuring that conclusions are both analytically sound and socially responsible in reflecting participant realities and historical complexities.

Access to Context and Research Participants:

Gaining access to both historical and contemporary social movements presents distinct methodological challenges that significantly shape the scope, depth, and reliability of this research. In studying the 1963 March on Washington, access is primarily mediated through archival materials, oral histories, secondary literature, and public database interviews with surviving participants. Such archival research methods are crucial for reconstructing past social realities when direct engagement with primary actors is impossible due to historical distance and passing of time (Mohr and Ventresca 2002). These sources provide invaluable insight into activists' motivations, self-perceptions, and collective strategies, but scholars must remain critically aware of inherent limitations, including memory erosion, selective recollection, and the influence of subsequent narratives (Thompson 2007).

In contrast, research on the 2020 racial justice protests in Kenosha benefits from greater immediacy and accessibility but encounters challenges intrinsic to volatile and polarized environments. The diverse range of participants, combined with trauma, mistrust, and legal concerns, necessitated collaboration with local leaders to facilitate access, placing an emphasis on relational ethics and community partnerships in fieldwork. Geographic distance and scheduling conflicts further complicated direct interviews, highlighting logistical barriers common in contemporary ethnographic and qualitative research (Mohr and Ventresca 2002).

Moreover, the broader political and social environment – marked by criminalization of protest, heightened polarization, and racial tensions – significantly impacted access, leading some participants to self-censor or decline engagement due to fears of backlash or misrepresentation. This reflects reflexive methodological considerations regarding power dynamics and participant vulnerability in contentious research contexts. It also underscores the importance of multi-source triangulation – combining interviews, media, public records, and content analysis – to develop a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of participant self-interpretation and movement dynamics. Collectively, these ethical and methodological challenges necessitate a flexible, multidisciplinary approach that balances historical distance with contemporary immediacy, prioritizes relational engagement, and triangulates diverse data sources to capture the complex realities of social movement participation.

Interpretation and Findings:

1963 March on Washington Findings

In order to streamline the process of working my way through the large amount of data I had to consult, I pulled out the most notable quotations for each source in relation to collective action, intersectionality, racial justice, policing, and protester violence.

- Interviews and Oral Histories

- (Gloria Hayes Richardson Oral History Interview Conducted by Joseph Mosnier in New York, New York, 2011 July 19)
- "We were fighting not just for integration, but for real change - jobs, housing, health care. The movement had to go beyond just laws."
- "We weren't waiting for permission to demand our rights."
- "We were honored to be on the stage but were not allowed full speeches." - (Courtland Cox Oral History Interview Conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Washington, D.C., 2011 July 08)
- "We revised John Lewis's speech under pressure. The original was more radical, but we compromised to keep the coalition together."
- "SNCC's participation was about making sure young people's voices and demands for real change were heard, not just symbolic gestures."
- (Dorie Ann Ladner and Joyce Ladner Oral History Interview Conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Washington, D.C., 2011 September 20)
- "Being young, Black women in the movement meant we had to fight to be heard - even within our own organizations."
- "Our goal was empowerment - helping people realize they could challenge the system and win."
- "We were on the ground in Mississippi, organizing voter registration drives. The March was a chance to bring these local struggles to national attention."
- (Diane Toroian Keggy 2023) - Bayard Rustin Oral History
- "We had to show the country that this was a disciplined, nonviolent movement - an army without guns, but not without strength."
- "The March on Washington was about jobs and freedom - economic justice, not just civil rights."
- "You have to create coalitions, even with those you disagree with, to make real change. That's how you move the country."

- JFK Library Archives (Stacey Flores Chandler 2020)

- "Organizers described their interactions with government officials at all levels...the administration had made its position clear…that the March would be a mistake. Then their position seemed to change, and since the March was inevitable, they would seek to control it and be a part of it."
- "John Lewis remembered telling President Kennedy about the March…If you bring a lot of people to Washington, won't there be a crisis, disorder, chaos?"

- CBS News Coverage of the 1963 March on Washington (CBS News 2023).
  - News anchors described the crowd as orderly, peaceful, and determined - "We're here because we believe change is possible."

- I Have a Dream Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Teaching American History)
  - "We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back."
  - "Now is the time to make the real promises of democracy."
  - "We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now."

- Civil Rights Act of 1964 (National Archives 2022)
  - Outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin - Enforced desegregation of schools and public places, a direct response to the March's demands

- Voting Rights Act of 1965 (National Archives 2022)
  - Banned literacy tests and other discriminatory practices
  - Passed in direct response to ongoing activism and pressure from civil rights movements

- Official Program for the 1963 March on Washington (National Archives 2021)
  - "Massive federal programs to train and place all unemployed workers - Negro and white - on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages."
  - Emphasized nonviolence and unity among all participants

- Washington Post 60 Year Anniversary Oral History (Williams, Clarence, and Washington Post Staff 2023)
  - Participants recalled the "sense of unity and purpose" that defined the day
  - "We knew the work wasn't finished, but we saw what was possible when people came together."

1963 March on Washington Research Interpretations

Participants in the 1963 March on Washington interpreted their roles as agents of profound social change, emphasizing that their activism extended beyond the pursuit of legal integration to encompass demands for economic justice, housing, jobs, and healthcare. Gloria Hayes Richardson, a prominent participant, reflected, "We were fighting not just for integration, but for real change - jobs, housing, health care. The movement had to go beyond just laws." This statement underscores the activists' comprehensive vision of equality, one that addressed systemic inequalities in economic and social realms. Moreover, Richardson asserted, "We weren't waiting for permission to demand our rights," highlighting the empowerment and agency felt by participants who positioned themselves as active claimants of justice rather than passive supplicants. However, she also candidly noted the marginalization women activists faced, “We were honored to be on the stage but were not allowed full speeches,” revealing persistent gendered challenges even within the movement.

Leaders and organizers like Bayard Rustin emphasized the importance of strategic coalition-building to achieve tangible impact, stating, “You have to create coalitions, even with those you disagree with, to make real change. That’s how you move the country.” Rustin’s view captures the pragmatic consensus-building necessary amidst diverse interests. Courtland Cox’s reflection affirms this strategy, “We revised John Lewis’s speech under pressure. The original was more radical, but we compromised to keep the coalition together.” Cox further highlighted SNCC’s role, “SNCC’s participation was about making sure young people’s voices and demands for real change were heard, not just symbolic gestures,” emphasizing generational and radical contributions within the broader coalition.

The Ladner sisters, Dorie Ann and Joyce, illustrated intersectional grassroots activism, noting, “Being young, Black women in the movement meant we had to fight to be heard - even within our own organizations.” They described how their efforts focused on empowerment and local grassroots organizing: “Our goal was empowerment - helping people realize they could challenge the system and win,” and “We were on the ground in Mississippi, organizing voter registration drives. The March was a chance to bring these local struggles to national attention.” These multifaceted roles and interpretations of activism collectively shaped the movement’s trajectory and goals. Johnson’s strategic orchestration manifested in the disciplined and nonviolent nature of the march, as Rustin observed, “We had to show the country that this was a disciplined, nonviolent movement - an army without guns, but not without strength.” The march’s peaceful demeanor was echoed by contemporary media coverage describing the crowd as “orderly, peaceful, and determined,” reinforcing the movement’s moral authority.

This diverse collective action culminated in landmark legislative victories like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The official program’s call for “Massive federal programs to train and place all unemployed workers - Negro and white - on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages” reflected these broader socioeconomic ambitions. Oral histories and retrospections emphasize the “sense of unity and purpose” that defined the day and the ongoing struggle: “We knew the work wasn’t finished, but we saw what was possible when people came together.”

Altogether, these nuanced participant accounts reveal how individual and collective identities intertwined to sustain a movement that was as much about economic and social justice as legal reform, illuminating the layered complexity behind one of the most transformative moments in U.S. civil rights history.

2020 Racial Justice Protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin Findings

- Officer Interviews

- Joseph Nosalik (Joseph Nosalik, interview by Abigail Nosalik, April 6, 2025)

- “2020 seemed to be the tipping point of frustration with the government and law enforcement, both at the local and national level.”
- “People had no idea who I was or what kind of person I was or how I personally felt about some of the controversial issues, but because I wore a badge people had a preconceived idea about me.”
- “I think the reliance on established law and those who have the authority to uphold those laws was considered to be something that was just accepted and if it wasn't you were probably a non law abiding citizen. Since 2020 I think the Kenosha Police Department has made some really great strides in becoming more a part of the community.”
- Aaron Dilhoff (Aaron Dilhoff, interview by Abigail Nosalik, April 10, 2025) - “I would describe the 2020 civil unrest in Kenosha specifically as chaos. Very chaotic, physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. As far as the effect on the community specifically, extremely destructive.”
- “I think we were doing some community outreach efforts prior to 2020, but I would classify it as more of checking the box of interaction and engagement prior to 2020, doing the trendy thing or whatever we needed to do. After 2020, that’s changed completely.”
- Joe Zarletti (Joe Zarletti, interview by Abigail Nosalik, April 19, 2025) - “The first night we got shot at, there was a lot that I experienced that wasn’t even on the news, responding to the shootings was more devastating, there was gunfire everywhere, and none of that was covered. Having mortars thrown at us that were taped with shrapnel and exploding was something I had never experienced before.”
- “I was worried about being burned alive rather than being shot.”
- “There were people who definitely understood why we were doing what we were doing, there were also people that were trying to use it as a platform to say how racist we were, and the majority of people we arrested were not from Kenosha.”
- “Nothing has gotten better in the Black community from Black Lives Matter; the American public was sold on a lie.”
- Colin Coultrip (Colin Coultrip, interview by Abigail Nosalik, April 17, 2025) - “That evolved into aerial fireworks being shot right at us, the injuries were bruises, burns, bumps.”
- “We couldn’t be both; we couldn’t be law enforcement and an average citizen.”
- “We don’t have the overtime budget to pay for some of these community outreach events; finding a way to host events without costing the county a ton of money.”
- John Doe 2 (John Doe 2, interview by Abigail Nosalik, April 17, 2025) - “I’ve been in three different civil unrests. You could feel the anger a lot more in 2020 than you could prior; some ways it was probably a good thing and some ways I wish our community wouldn’t have had to go through it, but I hope it develops building blocks for future generations.”

- <u>Participant Interviews and Survey</u>

- Lawrence Kirby II (Lawrence Kirby, interview by Abigail Nosalik, March 29, 2025)
- “The moment Snoop Dogg shared the video, I knew we had a national incident on our hands. Right away, I remembered interactions I had with law enforcement that were negative.”
- “Racism used law enforcement to enact fear in the hearts and minds of Black folks in this country.”

- “I wanted to inspire people to look forward to change, and when people come together and work together there is nothing we can’t accomplish. But also, I also find another unique role, I help other pastors process what racism looked like, especially with my White pastor friends, processing issues of race, and police brutality, and reform. It’s helpful to have sensitive conversations, becomes more realistic.”
- “Difficult time, moments of sweetness, as people maybe for the first time understood the frustration of others, I’ll never forget that time in our City.”
- “I hope we continue to see progress in policing in the community, and we have seen quite a bit of progress since then. There has been a lot of change. I've been proud of KPD since then, in terms of training and how they approach the community.”
- Lisa O’Reilly (Lisa O’Reilly, survey by Abigail Nosalik, April 15, 2025) - “People are people and should all be respected. The BLM movement needed attention. Racism is out of control.”
- “I protested - I hope in some way it brought attention to the need.”
- “The Civil Rights Movement was much more impactful.”
- John Doe (John Doe, interview by Abigail Nosalik, April 6, 2025)
- “The events surrounding Kenosha in August 2020 were extremely complex and multifaceted, there was an immediate need to bring order to prevent violence and prevent property destruction, that was of chief concern to stop violence, while of course protecting first amendment protests.”
- “There was a case against someone who was sentenced to 60 months in federal prison after he picked up a brick and hit an officer in the head, knocking him unconscious, and it was videotaped; he was proud of what he had done.”

2020 Racial Justice Protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin Research Interpretations Participants and law enforcement in the 2020 racial justice protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, navigated roles deeply shaped by community frustration, polarization, and urgent demands for systemic change following the police shooting of Jacob Blake. Officer Joseph Nosalik described 2020 as “the tipping point of frustration with the government and law enforcement, both at the local and national level,” noting how public perception was often shaped by preconceptions tied to his uniform rather than who he was personally. Both Nosalik and Aaron Dilhoff acknowledged a shift from superficial community engagement to more genuine outreach efforts by the Kenosha Police Department after 2020. However, officers like Joe Zarletti and Colin Coultrip vividly recalled the violence and physical dangers they faced, from gunfire to attacks with explosive devices, contributing to a sense of fear and exhaustion on the ground. Zarletti also described a complex crowd dynamic where some understood police motives while others used the unrest to allege systemic racism, underscoring polarized community narratives.

From the protester perspective, Lawrence Kirby II highlighted how the viral sharing of Jacob Blake's shooting rapidly transformed local outrage into a national reckoning with systemic racism. He emphasized the importance of collective action for change and fostering cross-racial dialogue among faith leaders and community members. Lisa O’Reilly echoed the need to address rampant racism and justified the protests as a call for attention to these issues, while noting the historical significance compared to earlier civil rights movements. Another participant, John Doe, captured the multifaceted nature of the events, recognizing the urgent need to maintain order amid protests and the complexity of community responses, including acts of violence such as assaults on officers.

Future Research:

While this research provides an analysis of participant self-understanding in the 1963 March on Washington and 2020 Kenosha protests, it opens several important avenues for future research to deepen and broaden understanding of racial justice movements and their dynamics. Methodologically, as Connolly (2024) highlights in discussing longitudinal approaches to social movements, analyzing how participant roles and collective identities evolve over time is essential to grasp the dynamic, processual nature of social movements beyond static snapshots. This aligns with the standard discourse analysis framework, which emphasizes that tracking changes in discourse over time increases the validity of findings by revealing causal sequences and critical discourse moments that shape movement trajectories. These longitudinal perspectives offer richer, more nuanced insights into the interaction between social, cultural, and political factors sustaining activism.

Future research could then expand the temporal and geographic scope by examining similar dynamics in other key protest events – such as the Ferguson uprisings in 2014, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, more recent movements like Stop Cop City in Atlanta, or the 1963 Civil Rights Movement more broadly. Doing so would deepen understanding of how collective identity, protest tactics, and law enforcement responses adapt in different contexts and over time. Additionally, ethnographic and longitudinal studies within policing institutions could uncover evolving cultural attitudes and training imperatives influencing protest interactions. Investigating digital activism's influence on narrative formation and participant self-perception would further enrich this research trajectory. Overall, grounding future studies in longitudinal, processual methodologies as demonstrated in this study will be key to bringing to light the emotional, cultural, and political infrastructures that sustain racial justice activism and challenge systems of oppression.

Conclusions:

The analysis of the 1963 March on Washington and the 2020 racial justice protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, reveals that participants in both movements drew upon powerful frameworks of identity, moral responsibility, and solidarity to define their roles in the struggle for social change. Marchers in 1963 saw themselves as part of a collective "we", and agents of peaceful reform, united by a shared vision for legislative and societal transformation. Their self-understanding as disciplined, nonviolent activists directly shaped the movement's large-scale, peaceful demonstrations and coalition building, which ultimately contributed to landmark policy achievements such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

In contrast, the 2020 Kenosha protesters interpreted their roles through a more urgent and intersectional lens, identifying not only as activists but also as community defenders responding to immediate threats and systemic injustices. The immediacy of their experiences were amplified by social media and real-time communication, and this shaped their collective actions towards both raising public awareness and demanding accountability from institutions, most notably law enforcement. Across both eras, participants' understandings of their roles was not static but evolved in response to changing political, technological, and cultural contexts. These self-conceptions influenced not only the tactics and goals of each movement but also the emotional and cultural infrastructures that sustained collective action over time. The resulting research also underscores the significant impact of law enforcement's self-perceptions and institutional cultures, which shaped the protest environment and public narratives around police legitimacy and overall justice and order in the city.

Additionally, this research acknowledges alternative explanations and potential weaknesses by situating its findings within a comparative, interpretive framework that foregrounds emotional and cultural infrastructures across generations. While structural political opportunity theories or economic determinism might explain protester mobilization in more mechanistic terms, they often overlook the nuanced meanings activists ascribe to their roles and how identity and solidarity evolve over time. By integrating qualitative interviews and archival analysis, this research critically addresses these alternatives, demonstrating that participants' self-understandings and moral commitments are central to strategizing and sustaining collective action. Furthermore, the cross-generational comparison reveals how historical context shapes activist and policing identities, explaining divergent findings as outcomes of evolving social, technological, and political landscapes rather than contradictory phenomena. Thus, rather than dismissing alternative theories, this research situates them alongside its interpretive approach to offer a more multifaceted understanding. Explicit engagement with these counterarguments both enhances the validity of the analysis and models methodological reflexivity. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the ways in which protest participants interpret their roles – as moral witnesses, community defenders, or agents of reform – are central to the evolution of protest strategies, the forging of collective identities, and the pursuit of social transformation. Understanding these self-conceptions is crucial because it addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding how social movements dynamically adapt in response to changing political and social contexts. By exploring how adaptability is rooted in participants' shifting interpretations of their roles, this study reveals not only the internal mechanisms that sustain social movements but also their capacity to respond to external challenges. This insight is particularly important for comprehending the resilience and efficacy of movements in the ongoing pursuit of racial justice and equality in the United States, as it underscores the power of collective identity and strategic evolution to sustain momentum over time. Through this lens, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of social movements' transformative potential in complex and evolving social landscapes.

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Appendix

1. Questions Asked to Police Officers in Interviews:

a. What is your name?

b. Do you consent to be directly quoted or would you prefer to remain anonymous? c. What was your age in August 2020, and what is your age currently?

d. What was your role (within the department) in August 2020, and what is your role today?

e. Describe the 2020 events/protests in a few words.

f. Did you, at any point during the events of 2020, feel like your life personally was in danger?

g. Did you or anyone you know sustain any injuries during August 2020, short-term or long-term?

h. Did you personally feel like the connotation of your role was interpreted differently by others?

i. What do you see as the most important role of police in the community? j. How do you feel about the department's efforts to build trust with the community, prior to 2020 and currently?

k. Any additional statements

2. Questions Asked to Community Activists and Protest Participants in Interviews: a. What is your name?

b. Do you consent to be directly quoted or would you prefer to remain anonymous? c. What was your age in August 2020, and what is your age currently? d. What was your role in August 2020, and what is your role today?

e. Describe the 2020 events/protests in a few words.

f. Did you, at any point during the events of 2020, feel like your life personally was in danger?

g. Did you or anyone you know sustain any injuries during August 2020, short-term or long-term?

h. Did you personally feel like the connotation of your role was interpreted differently by others?

i. What motivated you to participate in the 2020 protests in Kenosha? j. How did the events that led to the protests resonate with your personal experiences or understanding of racial injustice?

k. How do you define social change?

l. How do you see your participation in the protests as contributing or not contributing to social change?

m. Do you believe you were part of a larger movement or local action? What is the connection between the two in your mind?

n. What collective goals did you and other protesters share during the events in Kenosha? How were these goals communicated within the group?

o. How did you work with others in the protest to push for change, and what tactics did you use to amplify your message?

p. In your view, how does the 2020 Kenosha protest differ from or align with past civil rights actions, such as the 1963 Civil Rights Movement?

q. Do you see any similarities between your experiences specifically and those of participants in the Civil Rights Movement?

r. What do you hope the lasting impact of the Kenosha protests will be on future generations, especially in terms of racial justice?

s. Additional Statement

FEDERAL INTERVENTION AND LOCAL CRIME: A DIFFERENCE-IN-DISCONTINUITY STUDY OF THE 2025 TROOP DEPLOYMENTS

Sonya Purcell

Abstract:

Federal intervention in local policing escalated in 2025 when the Trump administration began deploying federal troops to Democratic-led cities. Previous federal mechanisms, such as pattern-and-practice investigations, have produced inconsistent results, raising questions about whether federal action is necessary or effective in reducing local crime. Trump's deployment strategy represents a new approach to crime reduction through military intervention. This study analyzes crime data from five of the six cities that the National Guard were deployed to in 2025 and comparable control cities, to evaluate whether troop deployment measurably reduces crime. Using a Difference-in-Discontinuity design, I compare crime rates in each city before and after deployment to crime trends in a control city over the same period, where no deployment had occurred. The analysis shows varying results of slight increases or slight decreases in crime, but no result is statistically significant; this indicates that the deployments did not lead to tangible outcomes regarding public safety. These findings have important implications when weighed against the high financial cost of federal deployments.

Introduction:

Over the duration of 2025, Trump sent National Guard troops to six cities: Los Angeles, DC, Portland, Chicago, Memphis, and New Orleans. On December 23, 2025, the Trump v. Illinois ruling led to the demobilization of troops in LA, Portland and Chicago. Despite this, Trump responded by posting to X: "We will come back, perhaps in a much different and stronger form, when crime begins to soar again — Only a question of time!" (Carrega 2025). Following this, on December 30th, he sent troops into New Orleans with the request of the Governor. Into 2026 , National Guard troop deployment in DC is anticipated to be extended until 2029 (Flynn and Gathright 2026), and Trump continues to push the policy onto new cities, like San Francisco (Quinton 2026). This is a lively and potentially expanding policy being implemented by the current administration and felt by all taxpayers.

Although reducing crime is a shared national interest, these actions sparked substantial legal and political controversy. Critics argue that troop deployments exceed presidential authority and serve partisan goals rather than public safety. While the constitutionality of these deployments remains contested both socially and throughout the judicial system (Schartz et al. 2025), their effectiveness is an empirical question which we analyze throughout this paper.

Federal involvement in local policing is not new. Pattern-and-practice investigations, authorized under Section 12601 have long been used to address systemic misconduct within police departments. However, these interventions have shown mixed effects on crime and police behavior. Some studies find that federal oversight improves long-term outcomes (Edwards and Rushin 2025); others demonstrate that it can contribute to “de-policing,” where officers reduce engagement due to heightened scrutiny (Koven 2025). Trump’s federal troop deployments represent a more aggressive and unprecedented form of intervention, expanding the scope of federal involvement beyond traditional oversight mechanisms.

By analyzing open-source crime data from the cities that received troops along with comparable control cities, this paper evaluates whether troop deployments produced any measurable shifts in crime, accounting for possible national trends. For each city that received deployments, I compare crime rates during the month before the deployment to the month following. I then compare these changes to crime trends in an adequate control city during the same period. This is an isolated causal approach compared to other long-term or annual comparisons seen through most news and academic media.

My initial hypothesis is that federal troop deployments do not causally reduce crime; through this design, this would look like a negligible change in crime rates, after the deployment. The results support this: the observed changes are not statistically distinguishable from random variation (Table A1). Given the high financial cost and legal uncertainty surrounding these deployments, this paper argues that they are both ineffective and inefficient.

Previous Federal Intervention and Local Militarization Efforts:

Reducing crime is a central objective of both local and national policymakers. While policing in the United States is primarily reserved to states under the Tenth Amendment (Congress.gov 1791), establishing a norm of local control over law enforcement, federal actors have periodically intervened in local policing systems through a range of mechanisms. Federal intervention in local policing has long been contested. Opponents frequently invoke constitutional federalism to argue against federal encroachment on local authority, while others view the absence of federal involvement as a failure of the federal government to address systemic issues in policing (Friedman, Harmon, and Heydari 2023). These debates have intensified in recent years, particularly as local departments face resource constraints and renewed public pressure for reform following high-profile incidents such as the 2020 killing of George Floyd (Friedman, Harmon, and Heydari 2023). As a result, federal intervention remains a politically contested and relatively infrequent approach to addressing crime.

The most prominent mechanism of federal intervention has been the Department of Justice pattern-and-practice investigations. These interventions are intended to identify unconstitutional policing practices and impose federally supervised reforms on local departments. Existing research on these investigations finds mixed and often context-dependent effects. Some scholarship suggests that pattern-and-practice investigations may induce “de policing,” in which officers reduce proactive enforcement in response to heightened scrutiny and increased administrative burden. For example, Koven (2025) documents officer perceptions that federal oversight discourages proactive policing and increases compliance-related constraints. Other studies emphasize that the effects of federal oversight vary depending on political context, public attention, and departmental responses, with some cases associated with reductions in crime and others with increases or no detectable change (Devi and Fryer 2020). Edwards and Rushin (2025), alternatively, finds consistent evidence that federal oversight has been followed by long-term decreases in city-wide crime rates. This variability suggests that pattern-and practice interventions do not operate through a single, uniform mechanism, but rather through behavioral responses by officers and departments that may alter enforcement intensity in different directions. However, this literature largely focuses on long-run institutional reform outcomes rather than short-term behavioral responses surrounding discrete intervention events.

A related but distinct dialogue examines police militarization, which provides an adjacent framework for understanding the consequences of expanded coercive state presence in local policing environments. Historically, the use of military force in domestic settings has been reserved for exceptional circumstances such as insurrections or large-scale civil unrest (Durudogan, Bryant, and Ombres 2025). Contemporary deployments of federal troops for routine violent crime control therefore represent a significant departure from historical precedent. Research on police militarization generally finds limited evidence that such strategies improve public safety outcomes (Meeks 2006). Instead, militarized policing is frequently associated with reduced community trust, heightened perceptions of state coercion, and exacerbated racial disparities in enforcement outcomes. Research on procedural justice further suggests that perceptions of unfair or coercive treatment by authorities reduce voluntary compliance and cooperation, while increasing the likelihood of negative behavioral responses such as resistance or aggression, providing a theoretical explanation for why militarized policing may undermine public safety outcomes (Riël Vermunt and Steensma 2016).

If militarization fails to enhance public safety at the departmental level, scaling up to military deployment suggests inherent implication of capacity to generate sustained or meaningful reductions in crime. Moreover, scholarship suggests that militarized interventions may generate unintended consequences that undermine their intended goals, producing social disruption without sustained reductions in crime (Steidley and Ramey 2019). In addition to direct interventions, the federal government has also shaped local crime policy through indirect mechanisms, including the expansion of federal jurisdiction over offenses such as robbery, extortion, loansharking, and drug trafficking (Miner 2017). These expansions extend federal authority into areas traditionally governed by state and local police powers and have been shown to shift local enforcement priorities toward national policy goals rather than community-specific needs (Friedman, Harmon, and Heydari 2023).

Taken together, this body of research on federal oversight, de-policing dynamics, and police militarization suggests that both direct federal intervention and indirect federal influence may produce heterogeneous and theoretically ambiguous effects. Competing mechanisms emerge across the literature: deterrence logic suggests that increased visible enforcement may reduce crime through heightened perceived risk of punishment (Edwards and Rushin 2025); de policing dynamics suggest that increased oversight or scrutiny may reduce proactive enforcement and potentially increase crime (Koven 2025); and legitimacy-based accounts suggest that coercive or militarized presence may erode community trust, weakening long-term compliance and cooperation with law enforcement (Meeks 2006).

However, despite these competing theoretical expectations, existing research has largely focused on the long-term effects of federal intervention, examining how policies shape institutional behavior and crime trends over extended periods. While this emphasis is appropriate for many forms of policing reform, federal troop deployments represent a more immediate and highly visible intervention, suggesting that short-term effects may be especially relevant in this context.

This distinction is particularly important given recent declines in national crime rates (Lopez 2026), which make it difficult to assess whether such interventions produce meaningful additional reductions in crime. Despite this, short-run analyses of federal troop deployments remain limited in the literature. This leaves an important empirical gap in understanding how these interventions affect crime dynamics in the immediate period surrounding deployment events.

Building on this literature, the present study examines the short-run effects of federal troop deployments on violent crime rates in affected cities, with attention to whether these interventions produce measurable discontinuities in crime trends at the point of deployment. To the best of current knowledge, there is limited quantitative research examining the short-run or long-run effects of the 2025 National Guard deployments, leaving their immediate impact on crime outcomes underexplored.

Data and Methods:

To evaluate the effectiveness of federal troop deployments across multiple cities in 2025, I analyze open-source police incident data from Los Angeles (LAPD 2024), Washington, D.C**.** (District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department 2025)**,** Portland (PPB 2025), Chicago ("Crimes - 2001 to Present" 2022), and Memphis ("MPD Public Safety Incidents" 2020), along with matched control cities where no deployment occurred. For each city, I extract incident-level records and retain two core variables: the date of occurrence and offense classification. While New Orleans received federal troops on December 30th, 2025, they are not included in this study as data was not readily available yet.

Because the administration justified deployments primarily as a response to violent crime, this study focuses exclusively on violent offenses; property and administrative offenses are excluded. The FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) definition of violent crime was used to subset each city's data (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2023).

Since crime trends exhibit strong seasonality(Kotevska et al. 2017) and nationwide trends show city-wide crime rates have had a declining trend (Lopez 2026), I restrict the analysis to a symmetric one-month window before and after each deployment date. This narrow time frame helps minimize the influence of broader trends and isolates the immediate effect of the intervention. Deployments represent a sudden and direct policy change; it is assumed that any meaningful impact on crime should appear as a visible shift at the cutoff. Daily violent crime rates per 100,000 residents are constructed for each city.

For each treated city, I implement a local linear Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) centered on the deployment date. In the absence of intervention, it is assumed that crime trends immediately before and after the cutoff are expected to evolve smoothly, producing similar regression lines on both sides. Theoretically, a causal effect of the deployment would appear as a discrete jump or drop in the estimated level of crime at that point. The key predictor is time relative to the deployment date, and the outcome is the change in estimated crime levels at the cutoff, measured as the difference between predicted values just before and just after deployment.

To isolate the causal effect of troop deployment from the broader national trends of decreasing city-wide crime rates (Lopez 2026), I pair each treated city with a comparison city chosen based on population size, political context, baseline crime levels, and availability of consistent public data. Los Angeles is compared to New York City, Washington, D.C. to Baltimore, Portland to Seattle, Chicago to Detroit, and Memphis to St. Louis (Table A3). These pairings allow for a Difference-in-Discontinuity (DiD-RDD) design, which subtracts the estimated discontinuity in the control city from that of the treated city; accounting for any unrelated trends to be accounted for.

It can be thought that daily crime rates are too irregular to give us reliable outcomes (Kotevska et al. 2017). To assess robustness and reduce daily reporting noise, I replicate each analysis using weekly aggregated violent crime counts. Weekly aggregation smooths high-frequency volatility and provides a check on whether observed effects persist beyond daily fluctuations (Table A2).

Empirical Results:

<u>Los Angeles</u>

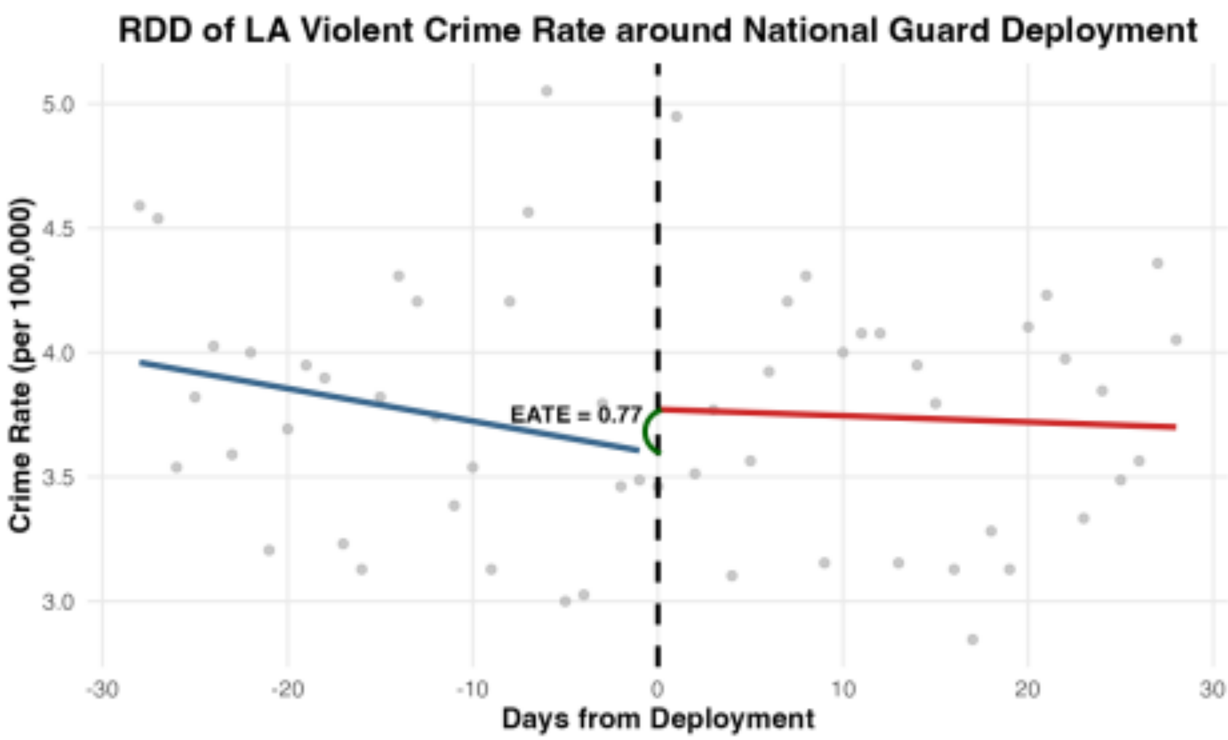

Figure 1: LA RDD

Los Angeles received federal troops on June 7, 2025. The daily RDD estimates an increase in violent crime (EATE = 0.773), though this effect is not statistically significant (p = 0.19). This suggests that although there is an estimated increase of approximately one crime per 100,000 people near the deployment, the troops did not tangibly change violent crime and may have coincided with a modest increase.

The weekly robustness check produces a larger estimated increase (EATE = 1.993) with a higher p-value (0.50). This reinforcing the upward trend observed in daily data while ramining statistically insignificant.

RDD Estimated Effect for Daily Violent Crime Rates (Los Angeles, CA)

EATE	SE	p_value	CI_95l	CI_95u
0.773	0.59	0.19	-0.384	1.929

Table 1 LA Results

Applying a DiD design with the results from Los Angeles and New York City, the results yield a smaller estimated effect (EATE = 0.26), also insignificant, indicating that part of the observed increase likely reflects broader national trends affecting large cities rather than a deployment-specific effect.

<u>Washington, D.C.</u>

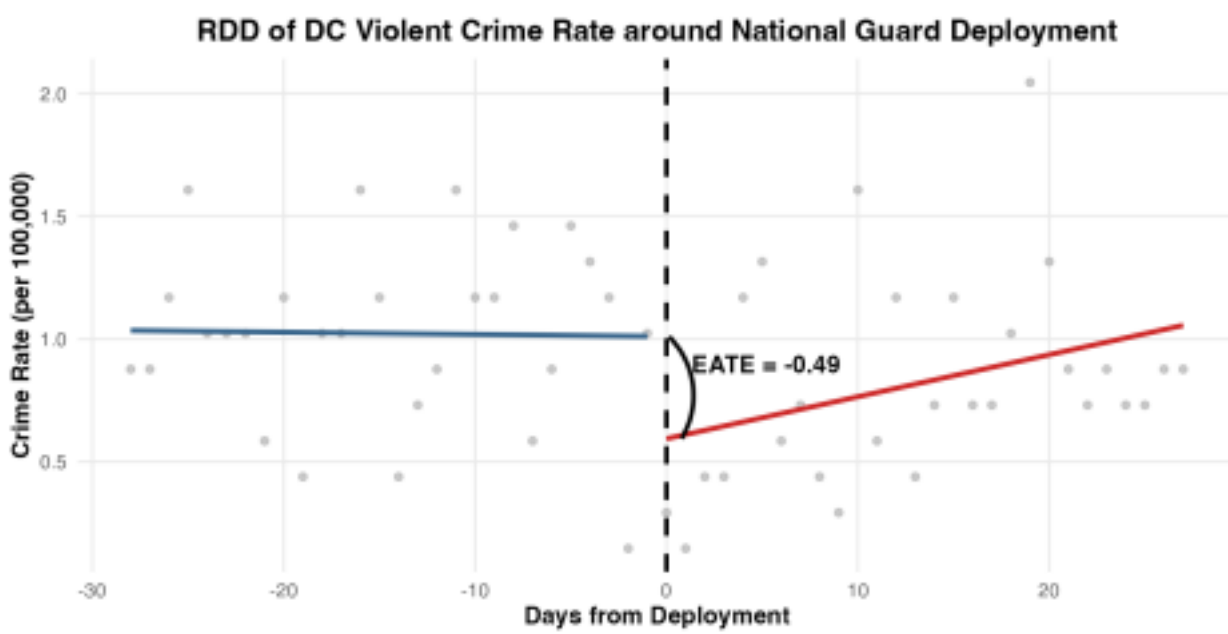

Figure 2 DC RDD

Daily violent crime analysis in D.C. shows a slight decrease following the August 11 deployment (EATE = -0.49), but this effect is statistically insignificant (p-value = 0.284). This suggests that the deployment did not tangibly affect violent crime and may have coincided with a modest decrease.

Weekly aggregation produces a smaller estimate (EATE = -0.175) with a very high p value (0.949), reinforcing that there was a downward trend within the period of the deployment, but it is indistinguishable from random variation.

RDD Estimated Effect for Daily Violent Crime Rates (DC)

EATE	SE	p_value	CI_95l	CI_95u
-0.49	0.479	0.284	-1.452	0.426

Table 2 DC Results

When Washington, D.C. is compared to Baltimore, the Difference-in-Discontinuity estimate rises to 3.96 and becomes statistically significant (p = 0.01). This indicates that post intervention changes in D.C.'s daily violent crime rates were significantly different from those observed in Baltimore. Relative to its control city, D.C. experienced an estimated increase of approximately four violent crimes per 100,000 people per day following the federal troop deployment. This suggests that D.C.'s crime trends worsened compared to Baltimore after the intervention, but it is not associated with the troops themselves.

<u>Portland</u>

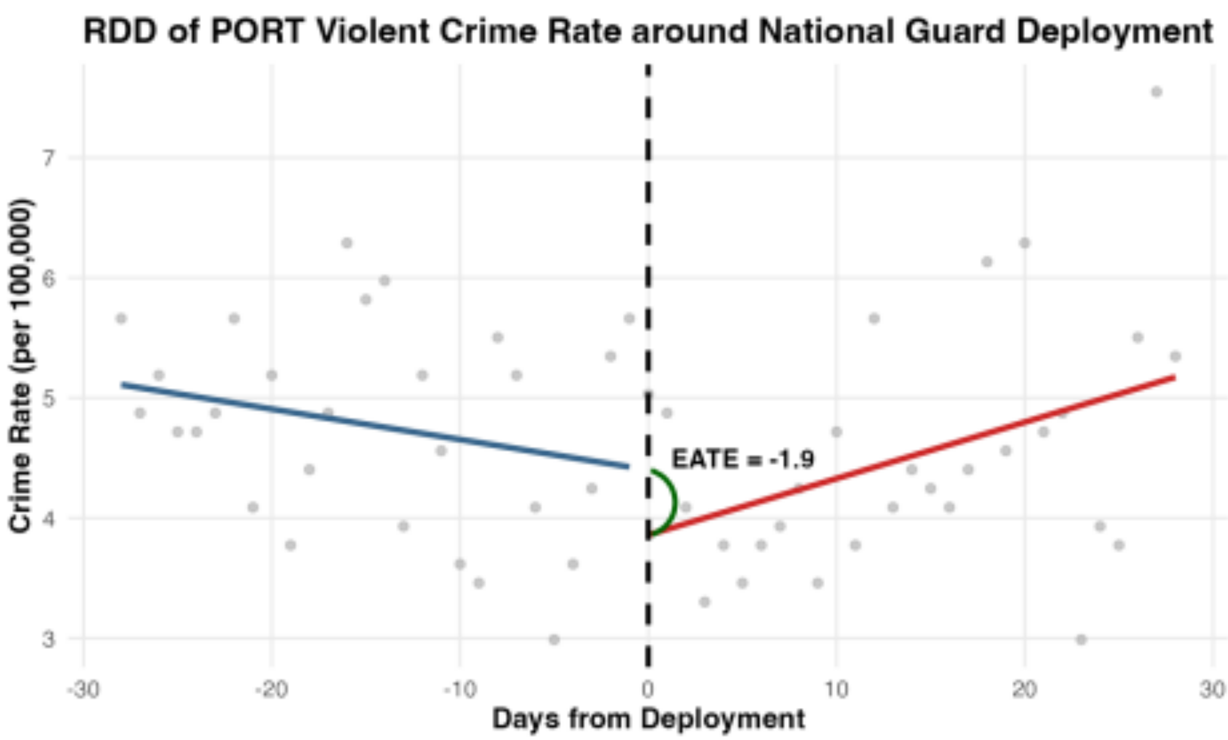

Figure 3 Portland RDD

Portland's October 5 deployment is associated with an estimated decrease in violent crime

(EATE = –1.885), but this effect is not statistically significant (p = 0.229). This suggests that the deployment did not tangibly affect violent crime and may have coincided with a modest decrease.

Weekly analysis produces a more extreme estimate (EATE = –3.05) with a higher p value (0.66). This again is reinforcing the downward trend observed in daily data while remaining statistically insignificant.

RDD Estimated Effect for Daily Violent Crime Rates (Portland, OR)

EATE	SE	p_value	CI_95l	CI_95u
-1.885	1.565	0.229	-4.953	1.184

Table 3 Portland Results

Comparison with Seattle yields a small EATE of –0.49, also insignificant. This shift in estimate does suggest that observed changes likely mirror some national decreasing trend rather than deployment impacts.

Chicago

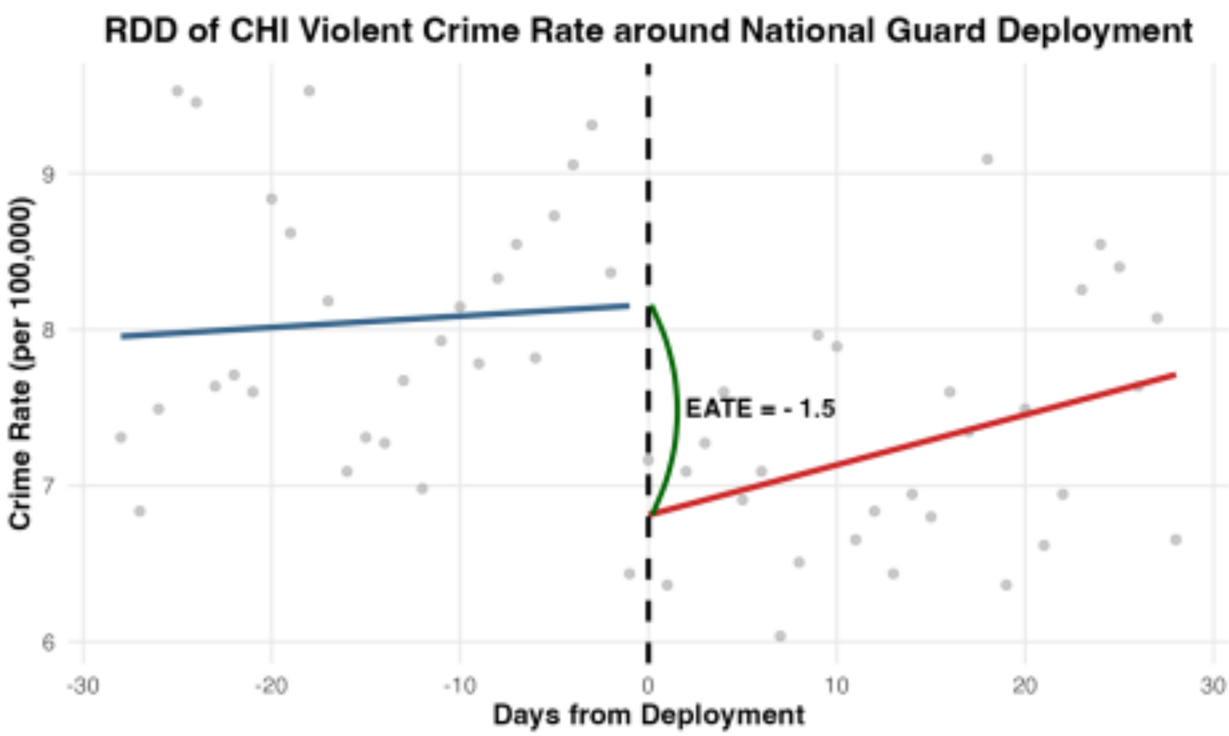

Figure 4 Chicago RDD

Chicago's daily analysis shows an estimated increase in violent crime (EATE = -1.541), though this is not statistically significant (p = 0.588). This suggests that the deployment did not tangibly change violent crime and may have coincided with a modest increase

Weekly aggregation produces a much larger magnitude estimate (EATE = -20.25) with a p-value of 0.067. This remains statistically insignificant, but can reinforce the decreasing trends seen in the daily crime rates.

RDD Estimated Effect for Daily Violent Crime Rates (Chicago, IL)

EATE	SE	p_value	CI_95l	CI_95u
-1.541	2.842	0.588	-4.029	7.111

Table 4 Chicago Results

Comparison with Detroit increases the EATE to 3.03 but remains statistically insignificant. Together, these results suggest that deployments in Chicago did not produce measurable changes and may be associated with rising violent crime, though uncertainty remains substantial.

<u>Memphis</u>

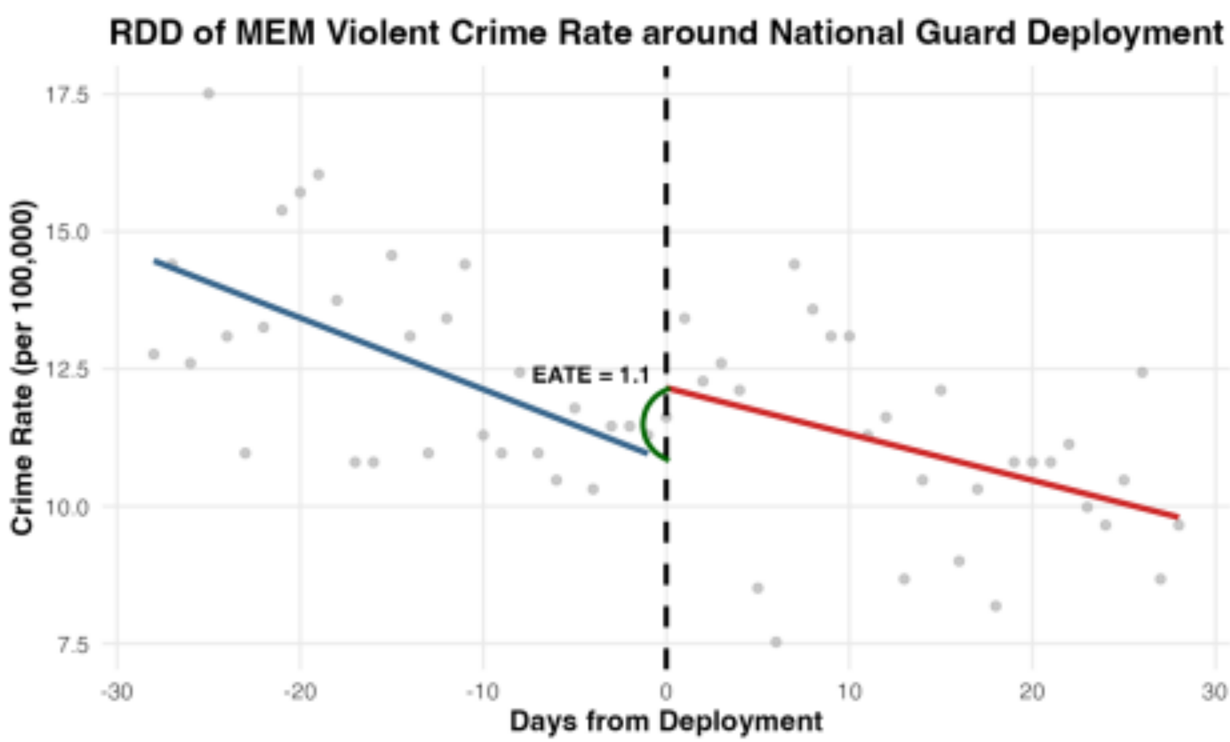

Figure 5 Memphis RDD

Memphis shows an estimated daily increase in violent crime (EATE = 1.065), again statistically insignificant (p = 0.279). This suggests that the deployment did not tangibly change violent crime and may have coincided with a modest increase

Weekly results amplify this trend (EATE = 8.595) with a very high p-value (0.815), indicating no reliable effect despite larger point estimates. This reinforcing the upward trend observed in daily data while remaining statistically insignificant.

RDD Estimated Effect for Daily Violent Crime Rates (Memphis, TN)

EATE	SE	p_value	CI_95l	CI_95u
1.065	0.983	0.279	-0.862	2.992

Table 5 Memphis Results

Comparison with St. Louis reduces the EATE to 0.74, implying that much of the observed change reflects national trends rather than local deployment effects.

Discussion:

Our current political climate is deeply polarized, and many critics frame Trump's federal troop deployments as part of a broader effort to expand executive power. But beyond political rhetoric, these deployments are also policy interventions justified on the grounds of reducing violent crime and enhancing public safety. Because crime reduction is a goal that transcends partisanship, it is important to evaluate the policy not only through its political symbolism but through its measurable outcomes.

The evidence from this study suggests that federal troop deployments did not produce meaningful changes to violent crime across the cities examined. In Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Portland, Chicago, and Memphis, estimated effects on violent crime are varying, statistically insignificant, and accompanied by wide confidence intervals that include both increases and decreases (Table A4). These patterns persist across daily analyses and weekly robustness checks. This holds for violent offenses such as robbery, aggravated assault, homicide, sexual assault, and kidnapping — the primary justification for the deployments. Neither city-level RDD estimates nor Difference-in-Discontinuity comparisons with control cities indicate a reliable decline in violent crime following troop arrivals.

These findings are consistent with broader research showing that federal interventions in local policing often generate inconsistent or limited effects. Previous efforts, including pattern or-practice investigations and police militarization, have similarly failed to demonstrate sustained crime reductions. The absence of a clear causal effect here highlights the difficulty of using top-down federal action to influence local crime dynamics, which are shaped by complex social, economic, and institutional factors.

Additionally, these results may be influenced by the highly publicized nature of the policy intervention. Building on Devi and Fryer's findings, the mixed results observed across cities in this study may reflect the effects of highly visible federal action rather than the direct impact of troop deployment itself. Devi and Fryer (2020) show that when pattern-and-practice investigations follow widely publicized incidents and intense media coverage, cities experience statistically significant increases in homicide and total crime, whereas lower-profile interventions are associated with reductions in crime. They argue that this divergence is largely driven by reductions in police activity and disruptions to routine enforcement during periods of heightened public scrutiny. The troop deployments examined here were similarly high-profile and politically contentious, accompanied by widespread media coverage and public debate over their legality. These conditions likely increased community tension and introduced uncertainty within law enforcement agencies, potentially leading officers to scale back proactive policing. As a result, the limited and inconsistent crime effects observed across cities may reflect shifts in police behavior and social dynamics associated with media attention and political conflict, rather than the direct causal impact of the deployments themselves. This suggests that highly publicized interventions can influence crime outcomes through indirect institutional and behavioral channels, complicating efforts to isolate their true effects.

At the same time, because media attention and public scrutiny are inherent features of large-scale federal interventions, these dynamics are not external confounders but rather part of the policy environment itself. Furthermore, the financial cost of these deployments also raises questions about policy efficiency. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that through December 2025, the troop deployments cost approximately $496 million (Swagel 2026). Using November 2025 estimation, this includes approximately $270 million in Washington, D.C., $172 million in Los Angeles, nearly $15 million in Portland, more than $3 million in Memphis, and almost $13 million in Chicago (Turse 2025). In Washington, D.C., where troops remain deployed as of 2026, November cost estimates place the mission at roughly $1.65 million per day (Fields 2026). Continuing the ongoing deployments at their end-of-2025 scale would cost approximately $1 billion annually (Swagel 2026). If interventions of this scale do not produce measurable reductions in violent crime, they are difficult to justify responsible uses of taxpayer funds. These figures underscore the opportunity costs of federal deployments, particularly when comparable resources could be directed toward local prevention efforts or community-based public safety initiatives.

Although the deployments have generated both substantial criticism and strong political support, the empirical evidence indicates that the strategy did not accomplish its stated goal of reducing violent crime. Legal and political debates will continue, but these results suggest that the deployments themselves provided little observable public safety benefit in the context of existing nationwide trends on city-wide crime rates. This study does face several limitations. First, while this study focuses on short-term effects in order to isolate causal impacts around deployment dates, these estimates should be interpreted in conjunction with longer-term analyses to provide a more complete understanding of crime dynamics. Short-window approaches are useful for identifying immediate responses and are particularly informative when considered alongside broader trends, but they do not capture longer-term effects that may also be important for understanding the full impact of these interventions. Second, although control cities were selected to approximate comparable urban contexts, this study does not account for contemporaneous changes in local policing practices or policy initiatives within those cities, which could confound estimated treatment effects. Additionally, as mentioned before, it is possible that any effects of the deployments could have been heavily dependent on media attention and public unrest surrounding the interventions; they may have temporarily altered behavior among affected communities, and this is something that should be further looked into.

Future research could employ longer pre- and post-deployment periods, examine heterogeneous impacts across neighborhoods, explore potential displacement effects, and incorporate socioeconomic covariates to better isolate causal mechanisms. If this policy intervention continues to be implemented by future administrations, under more consistent routines, further effects could be examined to ensure any media attention isn't altering crime behaviors. Expanding the sample to additional deployment cities and testing alternative temporal frameworks would further clarify whether the null results observed here generalize more broadly.

Conclusion:

This study finds no statistically significant evidence that federal troop deployments affected violent crime in any of the cities examined. Daily and weekly analyses varying and inconsistent estimates across Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Portland, Chicago, and Memphis. Weekly robustness checks largely confirm daily patterns, remaining insignificant in every city. DC's violent crime trajectory diverged from Baltimore after deployment, but this divergence cannot be confidently attributed to the troops themselves. Violent crime, explicitly cited by the administration as justification for deployment, shows no measurable improvement. When compared to control cities, apparent changes frequently diminish or reverse, indicating that national or regional trends, rather than troop presence, drive observed fluctuations.

These findings echo prior research on federal policing interventions, reinforcing the conclusion that top-down militarized responses do not reliably improve local public safety and can be inconsistent. Given costs exceeding one million dollars per day in some cities, such deployments appear neither effective nor efficient.

Despite this, President Trump has indicated plans to send troops back into cities should crime increase. The evidence here suggests that renewed deployments are unlikely to deliver meaningful reductions in violent crime.

Appendix:

Table A1

City	Role	Daily VC EATE	p-value
Los Angeles	Treatment	0.773	0.19
New York City	Control (LA)	0.37	0.26
Washington, DC	Treatment	-0.49	0.28
Baltimore	Control (DC)	-3.59	0.004
Portland	Treatment	-1.89	0.23
Seattle	Control (PORT)	-1.087	0.327
Chicago	Treatment	-1.54	0.59
Detroit	Control (CHI)	-1.48	0.49
Memphis	Treatment	1.07	0.28
St. Louis	Control (MEM)	0.092	0.88

Table A2

Treatment City	Daily EATE	Daily p-value	Weekly EATE	Weekly p-value
Los Angeles	0.773	0.19	1.993	0.50
Washington, DC	-0.49	0.28	-0.18	0.95
Portland	-1.89	0.23	-3.05	0.66
Chicago	1.54	0.59	-20.25	0.067
Memphis	1.07	0.28	8.60	0.82

Table A3

City	Population (2024 est.)	Median Income	Mayor's Party
Los Angeles, CA	*3.8 mil*	*$82k*	Democratic
New York City, NY *(Control for LA)*	*8.5 mil*	*$80k*	Democratic
Washington, D.C.	*702k*	*$110k*	Democratic
Baltimore, MD *(Control for DC)*	*569k*	*62k*	Democratic
Portland, OR	*636k*	*91k*	Democratic
Seattle, WA *(Control for PORT)*	781k	*124k*	Democratic
Chicago, IL	*2.7 mil*	*77k*	Democratic
Detroit, MI *(Control for CHI)*	*646k*	*40k*	Democratic
Memphis, TN	*611k*	*52k*	Democratic
St. Louis, MO *(Control for MEM)*	*280k*	*56k*	Democratic

Table A4

Treatment × Control	**Daily DiD EATE**	**p-value**	**95% CI**
LA × NYC	0.26	0.72	(-1.20, 1.72)
DC × BALT	3.96	0.01	(0.78, 7.15)
PORT × SEA	-0.49	0.82	(-4.64, 3.66)
CHI × DET	3.03	0.36	(-3.49, 9.55)
MEM × STL	0.74	0.75	(-3.80, 5.27)

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POST-BREXIT INTERNATIONAL TRADE: A CASE-COMPARISON ANALYSIS OF EU-MEMBER STATE TRADE WITH THE UNITED KINGDOM

Lauren Elizabeth Schnizlein

Abstract:
A substantial amount of scholarship in the field of international economics relies on conventional explanations for international trade, namely, trade policy. However, recent economic situations such as the United Kingdom's Brexit call into question these standard ways of analysis. This study examines how domestic factors such as politics, domestic-level economics, and an overall political economic culture, contribute to international trade factors. Focusing on UK goods exports to Germany and the Netherlands from 2012 to 2021, it investigates why trade increased with the Netherlands but declined with Germany following Brexit. These cases were chosen due to their controlled nature of EU-level trade policy, shifting the analysis towards domestic factors. Through a structured case study analysis using explaining-outcome process tracing, this study ultimately explores how domestic conditions reflected through political economic culture ultimately affect international trade. This contributes to broader debates in the field of international political economy by identifying alternative drivers of trade flows often overlooked in traditional models.

Keywords: Brexit, European Union trade policy, Political-economic culture, Process tracing, Trade divergence, Causal model

Introduction

Between 2012 and 2021, the United Kingdom's (UK's) goods exports to the Netherlands increased by 14%, while exports to Germany – traditionally Britain's largest European Union (EU) trading partner – fell by 7% (Office for National Statistics, n.d.). This divergence is puzzling: both states are EU members and thus have identical trade policies, are similarly located to the United Kingdom, and have comparable trade volumes, with Germany at 21.7% and the Netherlands at 16.4% of total EU imports in 2012 (European Union, n.d.-a). Traditional international trade economic models emphasize these variables of comparative advantage, proximity, and trade policy controls (Smith 1776; Bullock 1901; Price 1905; Anderson and Neary 1992; Bergstrand 1985). This paper investigates whether additional domestic-level variables, such as internal political stability, internal economic stability, political-economic culture, and supranational power, offer superior explanatory possibilities in cases such as these.

The Brexit period offers a natural experiment for isolating the desired domestic determinants. The United Kingdom's 2016 referendum on EU membership, followed by its formal withdrawal in 2020, created trade uncertainty. Yet, in the face of such uncertainty, both Germany and the Netherlands faced identical EU-level constraints. The European Union's structure of a customs union known as the Common Market controls high-level policy (Kerikmäe and Särav 2021). This ensures uniformity in states' negotiations such as tariffs, external trade agreements, and trade blocs. [1] Moreover, the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement maintained zero-tariff access of goods, further limiting the explanatory power of trade policy variables post-2020 (Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom… 2019). This institutional context effectively limits traditional explanatory variables around international trade through the European Union's structure.

This research addresses the following question: what explains the divergence in UK goods imports to the Netherlands and Germany between 2012 and 2021? Following standard research design, the literature review synthesizes not just the standard economic scholarship, but also political and political-economic scholarship. The methodology section presents a heuristic case study design using explaining-outcome process tracing to test a novel causal model integrating domestic factors. The analysis section examines government documents, economic data, and political developments to reveal the extent of political-economic culture on the impact of international trade. Specifically, the stability of free-trade ideological perspectives strongly predicts trade trajectories. The Netherlands' stable free-trade orientation correlates with trade growth, while Germany's shift towards economic protectionism correlates with trade decline. These findings suggest that domestic political-economic culture mediates how states respond to international trade shifts.

Literature Review

Economic Theory

Economic theories of international trade have evolved through three major waves, each expanding explanations for why and how states engage with international and bilateral trade. The first wave of classical theories analyzes advantages (Smith 1776, 432–37; Ricardo 1817). Adam Smith, named the "grandfather" of economics, claims that trade occurs when states hold absolute advantages, whereby states should trade only if they produce the largest quantity of a good versus other traders (Smith 1776, 432–37). Contemporary scholarship has moved past this framework. Scholarship centers on David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, whereby production and trade terms are dictated by opportunity costs and supply-demand dynamics. Trade remains beneficial even when one state has absolute advantage over all production (Price 1905; Ricardo 1817; Anderson and Neary 1994). As Ricardo wrote in his famous *On the Principles of Political Economy*, "The value of every commodity rises always in a direct ratio to the demand, and in an inverse ratio to the supply" (Ricardo 1817, 45).

The second wave of economic trade theory removes previous requirements of trade surpluses, emphasizing that states benefit in both political and economic welfare through trade, even when

[1] For more information, I recommend looking into international trade explanations, such as extensive research by Nobel-Prize winning economist Paul Krugman. His works comprehensively cover the traditional and modern models of international trade from an economic perspective.

experiencing trade deficits (Heckscher 1991, 2–8). This is also where we see a development of mathematical economics, and through classical theory emphasizing comparative and absolute advantages comes international trade calculations, where international trade is calculated as net exports minus net imports (Bullock 1901, 111; Krueger 1969, 3–5; Price 1905, 159; Heckscher 1991).

A third wave emerging in the 1980s emphasizes growth in international trade theory through measurements of expectations, economies of scale, and other aspects contributing to trade (Krugman 1990; Manski 2004). This subsection of trade theory, titled "New Trade Theory", emphasizes the need for intra-industry trade, trade amongst comparatively similar states, trade policies, and other explanations towards international trade systems.

Overall, concepts taken from the economic field contribute to this research in two ways. First, these theories help establish the research puzzle by demonstrating what traditional approaches predict. Applied to cases with similar economic situations, such as economic advancement, location, and development, these models would predict similar post-Brexit trade trajectories and cannot explain the diverging outcomes present. Secondly, beyond establishing the puzzle, economic theory helps operationalize core variables, such as the dependent variable drawn from net exports, and the independent variable of economic power within the EU. Economic power has standardly been quantified through GDP since the Bretton Woods system, a convention this study adopts (Kuznets 1956).

Political Theory

Political theory approaches trade with the philosophy of examining politicians, voters, and policies fixes of ineffective systems. In this case, a variable such as international trade is a tool to negotiate towards political stability. This concept is formally called capitalist peace theory (Gartzke 2007, 166; Powell and Chacha 2016, 525; Bremer 1992, 334–36). Democratic peace theory is a widely popular theory that argues that democratic states cooperate with each other because they are democracies. However, capitalist peace theory argues that democratic peace theory when controlling for economic metrics does not substantially reveal patterns (Doyle 1986). Gartzke argues that, instead, "…liberal peace [is] based on capitalism and common interstate interests" (Gartzke 2007). This group of scholars takes the stance that economic factors, namely free market economies within democratic states, drive patterns of trade, not the voting style itself. In contrast to the economic approach, where economics are driven by people, this grouping of research indicates that politics fundamentally shape economics, and people must turn to politics as a measure of enacting the desired economic change.

Capitalist peace theory has its critiques. Some such scholars have attempted to evolve the democratic peace theory model instead of overhauling it, as capitalist peace theory suggests (Elkjær and Iversen 2020). Others argue against sources like Gartzke's claim for capitalist peace's far-reaching applications, restricting it to only apply in war-time situations (Bremer 1992). And even more do not give any weight (Kelsey, n.d.). While some scholars raise valid critiques, and further research is needed to concretely test the scope of this theory, capitalist peace theory provides a useful framework of analysis. This paper examines political stability and liberalism as variables within the causal model affecting trade indirectly through the intervening variable of political-economic culture.

The Median Voter Theorem is also used within this paper, particularly its concept that politicians and political parties work with a goal of addressing the median voter so as to stay in power (Dresselhaus, n.d.). While not a perfect model, mostly due to its two-party or coalition-style requirements, within these political systems it is widely accepted. This is also a required warrant to state that government decisions and political party platforms work to address the median voter, and can thus be used as a lens of analysis into the politics of a state.

While capitalist peace theory and median voter logic provide frameworks for understanding how political stability influences trade, these theories assume stability, predicting that states seeking political legitimacy through economic performance should maintain consistent trade. However, these frameworks struggle to explain trade divergences between structurally similar democratic states. When political stability levels are comparable and international trade differs, analyzing intervening variables such as political-economic culture may be warranted.

Political Economy Theory

Whereas the grouping of economic theorists state that the drivers of trade are economic power, and political theorists argue that political power and peace drive trade, political economic theorists take the stance that politics and economics continuously affect each other, especially in the face of supranational politics such as those within the European Union (Milner 2009; Kerikmäe and Särav 2021; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2021; Ricardo 1817; Morrow et al. 1998). This category is wholly removed from its two namesakes, similarly to how social sciences exist in a space between natural sciences and humanities yet within their own category entirety.

One such argument within political economy spheres is in optimal placement of states along the trade openness scale, ranging from protectionist to free trade (Milner 2009). Researchers such as Milner argue for freer trade, on a spectrum to powerful historical politicians such as Alexander Hamilton arguing for protectionism (Ricardo 1817, 24–25; Krugman 1990; “Founders Online,” n.d.; Milner 2009). On the topics of the European Union and Brexit, whereas political theory would state Brexit was an entirely political decision, and economic theory would argue it was a fully monetary decision, political economy analyzes Brexit as a circular response. Kerikmäe and Särav’s work demonstrates that since the Common Customs Tariff (CCT) in 1968 passed into the European Union (a political decision in nature), a united customs tariff on every good or service (economic gains) imported into the European Union has been implemented (Kerikmäe and Särav 2021). This decision saves money for each trade, as well as resources in repetitive systems. Scholarship shows, on the other hand, that Brexit was a primarily *political* response to an economic worry surrounding labor market oversaturation, with economic and political ramifications still-yet-quantified (Webb and Ward 2024; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2021).

States within Europe, especially Western Europe, are considered “core countries”. This means they have highly diversified industries and strong state institutions. Following along with Wallerstein’s dependency theories, these states are thus at equal playing fields, and places heavier requirements for strong economic and political mechanisms disseminating around the world (Cope and Ness 2021).

Political-economic theory and its emphasis on cyclical relationships was paramount in designing the operationalization of the first independent variable in this research: political-economic stability. Having questions emphasizing the fact that these are, in nature, both funneling into a political-economic culture is necessary to defining and operationalizing the political-economic culture variable, as well as its place in the causal model.

While political economy frameworks are perhaps closest in their ability to address puzzles such as put forth in this research, they focus on policy formation within the changing state, rather than external shocks onto neighboring states. When multiple states face identical shocks, political economic theory would suggest similar responses. However, again, variation in outcomes despite shared frameworks suggests the stability of political-economic cultures, not just their present status, may be a critical factor in investigation. The methodology that follows integrates these economic, political, and political-economic frameworks into a unified causal model, operationalizing the interdependencies identified across these schools of thought.

Methodology

This study employs an explaining-outcome process tracing design using Mill's Methods of Difference (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 20; Baglione 2020, 153). This design controls for notable factors, so it can explain variance of the dependent variable using the fewest independent variables. In this case, the variation in dependent variable, the Netherlands' increased international trade with the United Kingdom versus Germany's decreased levels, is tested against independent variables: "political stability", "economic power", "share of supranational power", and "political-economic culture" (Office for National Statistics, n.d.).

This research follows a heuristic case study design, which develops new theoretical propositions by explaining an unexplained outcome (George and Bennett 2005, 77). Specifically, this study emphasizes that domestic political factors influence international trade, going beyond traditional economic explanations. This work primarily furthers the field by identifying pathways through linking known domestic variables to international trade outcomes.

Causal Model

The causal model below is designed with these goals in mind. It synthesizes theories in the literature that ultimately explain the dependent variable, integrating economic, political, and political-economic literature.

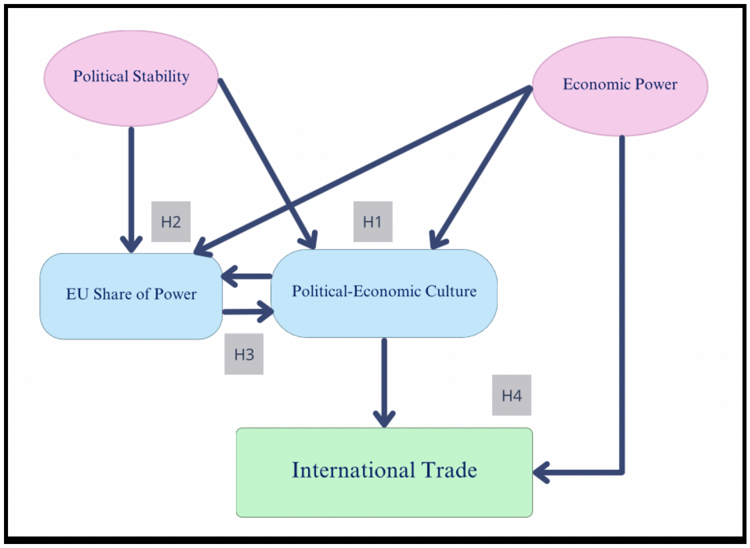

Figure 1: Causal Model for International Trade

Hypotheses

Four hypotheses emerge, addressing equifinality in domestic factors influencing international trade.

Hypothesis 1: In a comparison of states, a combination of Economic Power and Political stability is necessary to have a strong political economic culture.

Hypothesis 2: In a comparison of states, a combination of economic power, political stability, and a free-trade political economic culture is sufficient to have a high share of supranational power.

Hypothesis 3: In a comparison of states, those having a higher share of supranational power will be more likely to have a political-economic culture towards free trade and open markets, compared to those with a smaller share.

Hypothesis 4: In a comparison of states, a combination of a higher economic power and political-economic culture towards free trade and open markets is necessary for international trade.

There are four main hypotheses listed above, to address equifinality. However, due to prioritizing control over variation in case selection, Hypotheses 2 and 3 cannot be definitively tested. Both Germany and the Netherlands hold similar levels of political stability and EU power,[2] limiting the analytical leverage. This tradeoff is necessary to isolate the effects of economic power and political-economic culture, analyzed in Hypotheses 1 and 4. This is a foreseen limitation in the study, and prompts further future research into projects with greater case variation.

Case Selection

[2] See the analysis section for operationalization for this value, as it has to do with the way the variable was designed. For more information on the limitations on Hypotheses 2 and 3, see the conclusion.

The Netherlands and Germany (2012 to 2021) were selected as cases based on variations in the dependent variable while having controls for traditional trade determinants through their EU-membership and the EU supranational customs union (European Commission, n.d.). This allows for an isolation of domestic factors on which this research focuses. Additionally, both have similarly high levels of international trade with the United Kingdom and proportional shares of EU imports, controlling for arguments of scale at international and supranational levels (Office for National Statistics, n.d.; European Union, n.d.-a). Finally, they have a shared proximity to the United Kingdom, controlling for theories such as the Gravity Theory of Trade (Anderson 1979). These controls eliminate variables identified in economic and political theory as primary trade determinants, isolating the political-economic culture variable.

The timeline was chosen to bookend the Brexit Referendum and subsequent withdrawal. 2012 was chosen because, at three years pre-referendum and five years post-2008 recession, the economy had relatively bounced back but referendum discussion had not yet become mainstream. As the official withdrawal occurred in 2020, 2021 was chosen to complete the dataset of 2020, while accounting for data availability constraints, particularly for economic indicators published on five-to-ten-year cycles.

These cases are a most similar, but not identical, choice. While geographic position is similar, population size is not. Germany's population sits at around 84.4 million people, whereas the Netherlands sits at under a quarter of the same, at 17.9 million (European Union, n.d.-b; Federal Statistical Office, n.d.). Millions of other values exist beyond this research's scope, such as differing historical factors: German land traces more concretely to the Holy Roman Empire than the Netherlands', and more recently, the nations' involvements in World Wars differ widely, even though they were both founding members of the European Union. All these are important considerations to keep in mind, as natural experiments tend to be inescapable from all intervening variables.

The primary variation lies in the dependent variable. Netherlands-UK trade has increased 14% over the case period, whereas Germany-UK trade declined 7% (Office for National Statistics, n.d.). This is even when they have near-identical starting values from an EU-level trade volume. Germany and the Netherlands were selected in large part because they had the closest significant (greater than 0.2) shares of EU trade found within the data (European Union, n.d.-a). Despite these EU-level trade policies and near-identical initial trade volumes, the cases diverged over the 8-year timeline. This variation enables testing whether domestic factors explain trade outcomes when trade policies are held constant.

Operationalization of Variables

Dependent Variable: International Trade

International trade is operationalized as trade in goods volume and trajectory between states. Trade data were drawn from the United Kingdom's and European Union's Office for National Statistics (ONS), tracking annual exports or imports, respectively, over the case period 2012-2021 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.; European Union, n.d.-a). Net exports measure trade relationships, reflect comparative advantage, and are directly reported in GDP (as mentioned throughout the literature review). Percentage change was calculated by comparing 2012 and 2021 trade volumes, measuring the trajectory of trade relationships over the case period.

Trade volumes were categorized in two dimensions. The first was based on the original trade volume. When viewing the entire United Kingdom's ONS dataset, volumes for each partner globally were ranked, then arranged so as the top third (accounting for the most trade through UK goods exports) was considered "strong", the middle third "average", and the bottom third trading partners (accounting for the least exports) were considered "weak" trading partners. Second, changes in trade were quantified using marginal change thresholds. Changes within a marginal change of 5% were considered neutral, changes of >5% were considered strengthening, and those <-5% were considered weakening. The 5% threshold was used to account for normal economic volatility in developed economies. These coding decisions enable cross-case comparison, irrespective of cases chosen.

This operationalization achieves validity by offering objectivity through the quantitative nature of the data collection. While it excludes services trade by focusing on goods, it offers a standard model to measure trade. This also lends itself to replicability, as with standard coding and using official government databases, this could be replicated with ease. However, a potential limitation to mention is the tradeoff gaining objectivity and generalizability while losing contextual depth. While perceptions of trade strength in government reports were analyzed to act as a qualitative establishment so as to establish causal insight, these sources are not directly reflected in the variable's values and thus, remove some depth from the variation.

Independent Variable (IV) 1: International Political-Economic Culture

Political-economic culture is operationalized as the dominant ideological orientation toward international trade, including both stated policy positions as well as an evolutionary term indicating where the state is shifting towards. Drawing on political economy literature emphasis on domestic coalitions shaping trade policy, this variable looks at the stance of the governing political parties (Milner 2009). With the evolutionary component, this variable is then crosscut with whether the orientation remains stable or is shifting throughout the case period. Party platforms and government policies reveal the orientation of the public as, following the median voter theorem, parties from democratic states decide on economic policy to maintain political legitimacy.

Data points for this variable are entirely qualitative in nature. Primary sources included government statements from both case studies, party platform positions (especially those of rising extremist parties), and media coverage from major outlets in each state on both party structure and current events. These sources captured internal perspectives within each state. To enhance reliability through triangulation, focus is also placed on external assessments, such as the US State Department reports, and sources from the United Kingdom, to find outside viewpoints on structures within each of these cases.

Data coding used predetermined categories, derived from the literature. Free trade orientation was coded for when sources demonstrated willingness and openness to trade, namely in support of trade agreements, opposition to protective tariffs, and support for trade liberalization measures.

Protectionism, on the other hand, was coded when sources emphasized domestic industry protectionism, a support for protective tariffs, skepticism towards trade agreements, or economic protectionist rhetoric. Stability was assessed temporally. Throughout the 2012-2021 period, if there were to be major policy reversals, significant protectionist party growth, or other forms of change on the evidence mentioned prior, that would be considered shifting. If, across that timeline, there was not substantial change, this would be considered “stable”.

This operationalization achieves validity through multiple mechanisms. First, party platforms reveal can give insights into political-economic culture through the median voter theorem. However, they cannot give full insights, and so looking at other primary sources allows for triangulation of evidence. Reliability is addressed through predetermined coding categories; however interpretation variability is present due to the spectrum of free trade to protectionism instead of binaries like are seen in the quantitative variables seen below. This qualitative approach trades objectivity for cultural depth and is methodologically necessary. Traditionally quantitative variation such as tariffs and agreements is controlled for by the EU Common Market, requiring culture to explain the diverging outcomes of cases. As such, this approach is an appropriate method towards comparing cultural variation.

IV2: Political Stability

Drawing from political theories of research, political stability is operationalized as a state’s democratic legitimacy and public trust in governance, with a cross-cutting cleavage addressing the presence of a time variance throughout the case. Primary indicators of political stability include the Freedom House Civil Liberties and Political Rights scores, as well as presence of extremist party vote share, and media coverage content. Freedom House scores provide a quantitative, standardized insight into freedoms within a state, whereas far-right parties and media coverage give qualitative insight into ever-evolving political issues within the population.

Freedom House scores were categorized into three categories: High (scores 80 or above), Medium (scores between 80-60), and Low (scores below 60). Trajectory was assessed not only by the score changes present between 2012 to 2021, but also in the qualitative variables such as increase of extremist party vote share (far-right or far-left parties). A variety of different news sources, primarily digital including major national newspapers and political analysis sites, also contribute to this variable. Primarily, coverage of current events, coded as indicating stability challenges, were examined. Questions set up prior to the qualitative analysis were: How reliable do citizens believe their government is? How representative of the people does the public believe the government is? Are there extremist parties? If so, how powerful are they? How have these answers changed from 2012 to 2021?

Combining both the value of political stability scored by a quantitative metric with an evolving metric based on qualitative sources, addresses both reliability and depth. Validity comes from the quantitative term cementing results within the international context, without manually inflating or deflating content due to public perception. This starting value’s changes are then observed within the period through qualitative perceptive measures. Reliability is strengthened through a use of predetermined research questions and quantitative coding occurring prior to application in cases. These decisions in operationalization address contextual depth and a comparative case study lens, minimizing tradeoffs as much as possible.

IV3: Economic Power

Economic power is considered a state's productive capacity, economic trajectory, and market composition. Following the literature review discussion of GDP as the standard measure, this study employs GDP as the primary indicator (Kuznets 1956). GDP expressed in terms of purchasing power parity, was decided to be the measurement, as the emphasis in this paper is on welfare and goods, rather than nominal gains in-part defined by the monetary system. Economic trajectory is measured through the relative change in economic power (GDP) over the time frame. And finally, market composition, such as a primarily service, manufacturing, or other economy was included as a qualitative measurement to identify differences in markets, to not oversimplify economic power with pure quantitative values.

These values were then evaluated in comparison to the world stage. GDP levels were split into five categories: very high, high, average, low, and very low, pulled from the World Bank database for the beginning of the case period, 2012 (World Bank, n.d.). Special consideration was given to the top five economies (United States, China, Germany, Japan, and India), accounting for over 50% of the world GDP, with a relabeling of "very high" for these economies. Special consideration was also given to the least-weighted states, with those with a GDP under $1billion USD labelled as "very low". After these were identified, the remaining states were divided evenly by rank, with the top third placed in the "high" category, middle third into "average", and bottom third into "low". This categorized states in terms of their overall economic power and weight.

Economic change was measured in terms of change in overall share of GDP over the period 2012 to 2021. States were once again split in thirds and ranked in order of overall change in share of the sum of total world GDP. Since this is a zero-sum game, it naturally followed that these were categorized into three terms for economic change: "growing", "stable," and "shrinking". Finally, a qualitative measurement was introduced to the economic stability variable. This categorization into primary sector was found from not only databases, but from media sources, think tanks, and other sources to identify what consumers thought of their economy. The primary qualitative question that guided this aspect of the research was: where does the public believe their economy focuses on?

The operationalization achieves validity due to the fact that GDP captures market size and productive capacity, both dimensions emphasized in the literature review. Reliability is ensured through standardized processes in data analysis, enabling independent replication. And finally, contextual understanding draws from the qualitative sources drawn for the final question. While tradeoffs still persist, the overwhelming goal of the combination of qualitative and quantitative lends itself to minimizing tradeoffs while maximizing scope of analysis into these broadly categorized variables.

IV4: EU Share of Power

EU share of power is operationalized as a member state's sphere of influence on EU institutions, reflecting its capacity to shape supranational policy. The political economy literature stresses multidimensional power, and so this variable cross-cut with three types of power: political, economic, and proportional. Political power is further operationalized as political effectiveness (EU-level policy influence), economic power by percentage of EU GDP, and proportional power by a population metric, standardized by the number of seats a state holds in the European Parliament. These variables are all given equal weight, so as to avoid bias towards any one category. This multidimensional approach views the European Union through the lens of a political economist, where the EU has many branches of operation.

Each of these variables can take on potential values of “large,” “medium,” and “small.” For the economic indicator, all EU-member states’ GDP are analyzed, broken up in terciles. Proportional power was analyzed through number of seats in the European Parliament over the given time frame, as this represents not only voting power but also, indirectly due to the structure of Parliament, population size. And finally, political power was seen within a state’s ability to influence EU decision-making. For this, media coverage of European Parliament decisions and state influence on EU policy was analyzed.

This operationalization achieves validity by capturing formal institutional power across multiple dimensions of the European Union. Data gathered is publicly documented, and news sources are from reputable sources. However, limitations do exist in this model, such as not analyzing EU informal power, as well as in the potential over-simplification of weighting of categories. However, this was necessary to allow for systematic comparison across states. Future research could address these concerns.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Cases have been selected for control and variation in the original methodology, following George and Bennet’s recommendations.[3] Controlling for economic variables by selecting EU member states with roughly equal initial trade levels, and for political variables by selecting states with similar political situations, allows a simplified causal model analysis (European Union, n.d.-a; Webb and Ward 2024; Office for National Statistics, n.d.; Freedom House, n.d.-a; Wilson Center 2025; Freedom House, n.d.-b; Schmitz 2023). Data collection required research into sources from a multitude of fields, mediums, and writers to address triangulation. Economics tends to be more quantitative-focused, whereas politics and culture is more qualitative.

The mix of those approaches leads to a unique collection of data. This approach, while not formally labeled mixed-methods, combines numerical data analysis with more qualitative sources from government sources, public opinion and news, as well as non-case-specific sources (UK responses and viewpoints of states). This all emphasizes the idea of triangulation. This design addresses the different standards of evidence required across fields. The economics, and particularly international economics, field tends to expect numerical evidence to back claims, whereas the political field tends to desire more qualitative sources. Regardless of type, primary sources were analyzed with questions written based on the literature. Some sources were collected simultaneously to the model creation, as is standard with an explaining-outcome system. Others were collected after the model was created, as the theory-testing and triangulation phase, following the requirements of validity (Baglione 2020, 163).

Baglione also stresses reliability in terms of replicability, in that another researcher could follow these procedures and come to similar findings (Baglione 2020, 163). Reliability is ensured within this paper through transparency, at the forefront. All quantitative sources employ standardized international

[3] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, UNITED STATES: MIT Press, 2005), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aul/detail.action?docID=6401866, pp86-87.

trade and macroeconomics methodologies, citing from reputable sources such as the World Bank, Eurostat, and Freedom House. On the flipside, all qualitative sources are fully cited, enabling replication as necessary. This allows for the most transparency, and thus, facilitating a model in which future researchers could replicate.

Data analysis followed a similar approach. Theory is the center of research, so analysis should be focused on testing hypotheses rather than timeline-building, as highlighted in Atzili's work (Atzili 2006). Qualitative and quantitative indicators required different ways of analysis. Quantitative indicators, such as GDP, trade volumes, and Freedom House scores, were compiled in a spreadsheet format and categorized according to thresholds outlined in the operationalization section. Qualitative indicators were analyzed through content analysis, coded through predetermined categories listed in the operationalization section. Both forms were then synthesized into Figure 2 as shown below, enabling systematic cross-case comparison.

Analysis

Case Comparison Table

Case 2012-2021	**Political Stability**	**Economic Power**	**Political-Economic Culture**	**Share of EU Power**	**International Trade (with UK)**
Germany	High, decreasing	Very high, stable, industrial economy	Free trade, shifting towards protectionism	High Economic, High Proportional, Medium Political	Very Strong, Weakening
Netherlands	High, decreasing	High, growing, service economy	Free trade, stable	High Economic, Medium Proportional, High Political	Very Strong, Strengthening

Figure 2: Case Comparison Table

Hypothesis 1: In a comparison of states, a combination of economic power and political stability is necessary to have a strong political economic culture.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) is partially supported. Both cases demonstrate high political stability (albeit decreasing), fulfilling the necessary condition, and variation in economic power correlates with divergent political-economic culture trajectories. However, not enough evidence is found with the existing model to definitively support a causal connection between this hypothesis.

Both states show a high, yet decreasing, political stability. The Netherlands' freedom index is high, at a score of 98 points out of 100 (Freedom House, n.d.-b). They have a succinct and yet agreed-upon policy agenda, developed by all parties in a multi-partisan effort in 2012 (Netherlands

Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011). However, challenges emerged over the course of the case period, leading to a decreasing yet stable democracy. The Netherlands emphasized climate reform with laws designed to reduce emissions (United States Department of Agriculture 2021). While climate advocates found this to be a great success, portions of the population believed these new policies to be overbearing, triggering a Farmers-Citizens Movement, resulting in a new right-wing, minority political party (Marchant 2024; Schmitz 2023; Politico 2019). Germany, as well, has a high freedom score, at a 94 (Freedom House, n.d.-a). While lower than the Netherlands, this score is still significantly high on the scale out of 100. Yet the state also struggles with far-right protests and movements. Within the case period, Germany saw the AfD double its share of power within the legislative branch of power (Fratzscher 2017; Wilson Center 2025). This rise in the AfD, a far-right party with a national-conservative ideology for both economic and cultural terms, has been both in a response to a lack of trust in the German government, and has facilitated continued lack of trust as the overall government shifts away from a moderate baseline (Deutsche Welle 2025). Both cases saw similar democratic states with high levels of political stability democratically backslide towards right-wing minority parties, revealing a high, yet decreasing, political stability.

In terms of economic power, Germany boasts a very high power, with a stable, industrial economy, seen from both within and from outside sources and states (Glunz 2025; *Beacon of Prosperity* 2025; U.S. Department of State, n.d.; Deutschland.de 2025). This is standard in the modern economic era and seen within the literature as Germany is referenced as a core state, per World Systems Theory (Cope and Ness 2021). Similarly, the Netherlands is seen as a statistically high (yet not matching Germany's level) power (Statista, n.d.; "Netherlands Archives" 2025). And yet, the Netherlands, as a contrast to Germany, has been seen as a growing economy both internally and by many third-party states, including the United States ("Netherlands," n.d.; "Key Industries," n.d.). This has been connected to their varying economic sectors. The Netherlands is primarily a service economy, compared to Germany's industrial one (LCCI, n.d.). This service economy has grown during the case, mostly due to environmentally friendly avenues of trade (De Nederlandsche Bank, n.d.; "Key Industries," n.d.; Rekenkamer 2024; United States Department of Agriculture 2021).

Hypothesis one posits that a combination of political stability and economic power leads to a political economic culture trending towards free trade. This hypothesis is partially supported, albeit not at a causal level. As the Netherlands and Germany both have a high yet decreasing political stability, Mills Methods cannot work in analysis. The second aspect however, in economic power, creates the margin of difference for the hypothesis to be upheld. While both states have strong economic power, the Netherlands' growth correlates with its difference in political-economic culture.

Germany's political economic culture is seen to be free trade in nature, looking towards trading with as many partners as possible (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). And yet, the rise of the AfD has been associated with a not only a trend towards conservative social ideals, but a conservative nature in economic as well, with a decrease in immigration, net exports, and more (Deutsche Welle 2025). This backsliding trend is correlated with Germany's political and economic situation, as H1 predicts. The Netherlands, on the other side, has a stable front in free trade, where it continues to evolve so as to have open markets throughout the case study ("Netherlands," n.d.; Netherlands Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation 2014; *Climate Change* 2017). This is associated with the varying economic power variable, along with the necessary political stability variation given.

H1 is partially supported through correlational evidence. The necessary condition – high political stability – is present in both cases, limiting its explanatory power. The varying condition – economic power and trajectory – correlates with political-economic divergence. However, establishing necessity requires higher case variation than this study's scope allows.

Hypothesis 2: In a comparison of states, a combination of economic power, political stability, and a free-trade political economic culture is sufficient to have a high share of supranational power.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) is inconclusive with this case study. Supranational power was quantified on the basis of economic, proportional, and political representation, scored with equal weighting. As both states have an equal distribution of scores (two highs and one medium each), there is insufficient variation in variable to test Hypothesis 2.

In terms of economic power within the European Union, both states are considered to have high values. As was previously mentioned, both are considered core states due to economic situations, and both fall into the upper third of trade (European Union, n.d.-a). In terms of proportional representation, Germany holds the most seats within the EU Parliament, gaining the "high" valuation, attributing to its large population (Kerikmäe and Särav 2021; European Parliament, n.d.). Whereas the Netherlands, in contrast, held an average of 26 seats in the EU, equating itself to a medium proportional value (Kerikmäe and Särav 2021; European Parliament, n.d.). Finally, the political variable was distinguished based on how effective the state was over the eight year period to affect EU-level change. Germany was moderately effective, with no major setbacks (Eurostat 2024). However, the Netherlands was highly successful, with many environmental policies not only due to the EU's goals but helped push all other 26 member states in the EU themselves towards more drastic environmental policies (United States Department of Agriculture 2021; Otjes and De Jonge 2023). While this hypothesis represents an important pathway in the causal model, testing it requires case variation absent from this design. Future research can be conducted to address this, including states with varying EU power levels.

Hypothesis 3: In a comparison of states, those having a higher share of supranational power will be more likely to have a political-economic culture towards free trade and open markets, compared to those with a smaller share.

Hypothesis 3 is also inconclusive due to insufficient variation in supranational power, encountering considerable limitations in testability. Notably, the strengths and weaknesses vary, and further research could delve into this aspect. However, at present, supranational influence may be present as the literature suggests, but its effects diffuse throughout the design of the study and are thus unable to be quantified with the given research. This ambiguity suggests the need for further case-specific or longitudinal research to parse out these subtle but potentially significant effects.

This hypothesis is still an important one, and in the case of a rejection could have had large impacts on the rejection of the entire causal model's proposed cyclic nature. However, it does need to be noted that again, one of the limitations of the design is that, though cyclic variation is built into the model, a 2-case comparative study over a limited timeframe designed to control for many variables does not have enough variation to parse out all links of the causal model. This is better suited to other models testing in future research.

Hypothesis 4: In a comparison of states, a combination of a higher economic power and political-economic culture towards free trade and open markets is necessary for international trade.

Hypothesis 4 is strongly supported by the evidence. The combination of economic power trajectory and political-economic culture stability links and predicts the subsequent trade outcomes over the case period, revealing an accepted hypothesis. To begin this hypothesis, international trade with the United Kingdom is quantified. Germany has traditionally been one of the United Kingdom's strongest trading partners, with deep economic ties spanning decades, as well as being a large proportion of the European Union's imports with all states (Glunz 2025; Deutschland.de 2025). However, during the period in question, the trade relationship experienced noticeable strain.[4] This was particularly evident in the context of Brexit, which introduced significant uncertainty and regulatory complexity into UK-EU trade relations. German economists widely described Brexit as an "economic disaster" for both UK-German trade and broader EU economic cohesion (*Reuters* 2023; Deutsche Bank 2019). In response, a range of stakeholders—including NGOs, policy institutions, and government bodies—have sought to analyze, critique, and ultimately repair the evolving trade landscape ("Post-Brexit Trade Information," n.d.; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d.; Deutsche Bank 2019). These efforts reflect the recognized value of restoring stability to what has historically been a high-volume and mutually beneficial economic relationship, however still resulted in a decrease of 7% over the case period of 2012 to 2021 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.).

The Netherlands**,** similarly, stands out as a vital trading partner for the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics, n.d.; European Union, n.d.-a). Its geographic proximity, long-standing maritime and commercial infrastructure, and cultural-economic alignment with both the UK and the broader EU position it uniquely within European trade dynamics. The Netherlands has, in many respects, increased its relevance within the EU's trade architecture as a result of Brexit, with greater expectations placed upon it to uphold and facilitate cross-channel trade (Rekenkamer 2024; LCCI, n.d.). Consequently, Dutch trade policy has become even more attuned to the importance of maintaining robust relationships with key partners like the UK. The Netherlands' location, values, and pragmatic orientation toward international commerce have collectively reinforced its strategic role in navigating post-Brexit trade challenges and opportunities and saw an increase in 14% over the term of the case (Office for National Statistics, n.d.).

[4] Ibid.

Cases	**Percent Change Exports to UK 2012-2021**	**Share of EU Imports by Member State 2012**
Germany	**-7%**	**21.7**
Netherlands	**14%**	**16.4**

Figure 3: International Trade Statistics

The combination of Germany's very high, and yet stable economy with its free trade political-economic system shifting towards protectionism led to a decrease in international trade, whereas Netherlands' high and growing economy with a stable political-economic system led to an increase in international trade. This pattern supports a causal relationship, where the combination of high economic power and political-economic culture of free trade is necessary for international trade. As Germany experienced a reduction in one (shift towards protectionism), international trade declined. This pattern was absent in the Netherlands' stable free-trade context.

Conclusion/Implications

Domestic political-economic culture significantly shapes trade patterns when trade policy is held constant. Analysis of UK trade with the Netherlands and Germany from 2012 to 2021 reveals that the Netherlands-UK trade increased 14%, while Germany-UK trade decreased 7%, despite identical EU-level trade policies and comparable initial conditions (European Union, n.d.-a; European Commission, n.d.; Kerikmäe and Särav 2021; Office for National Statistics, n.d.). This divergence is strongly correlated with Germany's shift towards a protectionist political-economic culture, compared to the stable Netherlands' free-trade culture. While this study cannot definitively establish causation due to the limitations of a two-case comparative design, the strong correlation after controlling for supranational trade policy, geographic proximity, initial trade volumes, along with historical influence and political variance, warrants further investigation into domestic political-economic factors as trade determinants.

This study suggests several key implications for the broader understanding of international trade relations, particularly within the context of the European Union. One notable implication is in the significance of domestic political-economic culture in shaping international trade behavior. While existing literature often emphasizes structural economic indicators such as trade agreements, blocs, tariffs, and other international-level deals, this research supports a shift towards domestic-level indicators such as the state's political-economic culture playing a major part in trade dynamics. This is since even among states with similar economic profiles and level of EU integration, there were differences in trade. Overall, this highlights the limit of a one-size-fits-all model for EU trade, and a necessity to look into domestic-level differences in states to fully account for trade relations.

For policymakers, these findings carry three main practical implications. While decisions surrounding new trade agreements and deals are typically viewed with a political lens, pre-existing international trade situations are less frequently looked at through this lens. However, states considering maintaining trade relationships during periods of instability should recognize that their current political-economic state may have a deep and far-reaching effects on their economic outcomes. States with rightward policy shifts may see trade relationships weaken even without formal trade policy changes. Second, states considering EU membership or withdrawal should consider their political-economic culture as an intervening variable when debating the direct effects of joining a customs union with supranational trade policies. Third, policymakers considering these findings should realize that maintaining a free trade political-economic culture *within* their state may be just as important as negotiating trade agreements with *other* states. All three of these implications are far-reaching, important ones that have the possibility of reshaping how trade policy and international trade is conducted.

It is important to note, however, that there are limitations that exist due to the data given. As data is slow to roll out, especially on topics such as states of economies, the case selection had to be bookended to shortly after Brexit occurred. However, political-economic theory posits that the political and economic situations continue to have a causal effect on one another. That would mean that, years after Brexit, there would still be shifts in both the economic and political spheres. As data continues to emerge, widening the time frame to account for these impacts would not only be methodologically sound, but it would also buffer the effects seen through the COVID-19 global pandemic, that are impossible to not mention as a potential limitation of analysis.

Another limitation is that this study cannot definitively rule out state size as an alternative explanation. As seen in the variable EU share of power, Germany has a larger proportional representation than the Netherlands. As EU proportional representation comes from population size, this shows Germany has a much larger population than the Netherlands does (European Parliament, n.d.). A realism-based IR theory built by Katzenstein and continued by Ingebritsen posits that small states have a lower industrial mobility, and thus, without a significant proportion of the population calling for a change, do not have the power to test out new policies which have a greater chance of going wrong (Ingebritsen et al. 2006, 193–217, 232–40). Analyzing from this lens, where Germany could start to pivot its focuses almost immediately, there was not a large enough shift in perspective to allow the Netherlands to do the same. Future research into this point would be highly interesting and might shift the EU power variable into being more substantive than the original causal model proposed, or even adding a new variable of population size itself.

A third limitation draws from the design itself. With a small number of cases (n=2) and by holding constant EU-level institutions and geographic factors, this study's design prioritizes internal validity over generalizability. Consequently, Hypotheses 2 and 3 exhibit limited variation within the 2012-2021 timeframe—a feature of the Brexit context rather than a design limitation. Combined with the constricted timing due to Brexit functioning over a period of five years, political stability and EU power are naturally similar between cases.

Future research should pursue three directions. First, to address the timeline concern, employing longitudinal designs across multiple external shocks, or expanding to analyze post-Brexit effects as data arises, can buffer the effects of short-run arguments. Second, to address the limitation of a small-n case design, expanding beyond Western Europe, while keeping to EU-member states, can reveal potential tests for Hypotheses 2 and 3. Third, to test generalizability further, apply this framework to other trade disruptions such as potential future EU-exits, USMCA tensions, or China trade tensions. This would assess whether domestic political-economic culture affects trade outcomes across supranational agreements.

While more research is needed to fully work through this causal model, designing one with Brexit and all the naturally occurring controls in mind assists in finding domestic-level variables. These variables, when linked together, demonstrate how domestic factors – votes, domestic-side development, and the overall culture – translate into international-level outcomes such as trade flows. This knowledge helps illuminate how interconnected each level of analysis is, challenging the artificial separation between domestic politics and international economics.

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF EROSION: STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN THE 21st CENTURY

Michael Skillmore

Abstract

This study investigates the structural determinants of democratic backsliding in the 21st century by examining the roles of economic inequality, corruption, and political polarization. While liberal democracy was once seen as the natural endpoint of modernization, recent global trends indicate a widespread erosion of democratic institutions through gradual and legalistic means. Using cross-national data from 81 countries and a multiple linear regression model conducted in SPSS, this paper evaluates how these structural variables influence scores on the Liberal Democracy Index.

The analysis reveals that both corruption and political polarization are statistically significant and substantively strong predictors of democratic decline. Corruption has the most pronounced effect, supporting theories that emphasize its role in weakening institutional accountability and public trust. Political polarization also contributes to democratic erosion by fostering legislative gridlock, reducing inter-party cooperation, and enabling executive overreach. In contrast, economic inequality does not exhibit a statistically significant direct effect within the model, suggesting its influence may be conditional or mediated through other institutional factors.

By directly comparing distributive and institutional explanations within a single empirical model, this study clarifies the relative weight of these competing accounts in explaining democratic backsliding. These findings contribute to the growing literature on autocratization by providing a theory-driven and data-supported framework for assessing democratic vulnerability.

The study concludes that institutional integrity is more critical than economic distribution in preserving liberal democratic governance. However, the analysis is limited by its cross-sectional design and restricted sample, which excludes many developed democracies and omits factors such as digital disinformation and populist rhetoric.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, corruption, political polarization, income inequality, liberal democracy, autocratization, institutional integrity.

Introduction

In the 21st century, liberal democracy is no longer assumed to be the inevitable political destination of modern states. Once viewed as the natural culmination of modernization, democracy now finds itself in retreat. Countries once firmly rooted in liberal democratic traditions, whether long-established or newly transitioned, are undergoing a slow, often legalistic unraveling of their democratic institutions. This global pattern of "autocratization," a gradual shift toward authoritarianism concealed behind the façade of electoral legitimacy, raises a critical question: what structural forces are driving this erosion?

This paper investigates three deeply interconnected forces: economic inequality, political polarization, and corruption. These factors appear to be primary culprits behind democratic decline. Drawing on both classical theory and modern empirical research, I explore how these dynamics, individually and in concert, degrade democratic norms, weaken institutional safeguards, and enable executive overreach. Through a cross-national regression analysis conducted using SPSS, I aim to evaluate the explanatory power of these factors and contribute to the growing body of literature on democratic backsliding. The remainder of this paper reviews the literature on the structural determinants of democratic decline, presents the theoretical framework and hypotheses, details the data and methodological approach, and concludes with an analysis of the results and their broader implications for democratic resilience.

The analysis demonstrates that corruption and political polarization emerge as significantly stronger predictors of democratic decline than economic inequality. In doing so, this paper advances existing research by adjudicating between distributive and institutional explanations of democratic backsliding within a unified cross-national framework.

Literature Review

Structural Explanations of Democratic Backsliding

Contemporary scholarship on democratic backsliding diverges not only over which structural factors matter, but over how democratic erosion occurs. While there is broad agreement that economic inequality, corruption, and political polarization each place strain on democratic institutions, the literature remains divided over their relative causal importance and their position within the broader process of autocratization. Some scholars treat inequality as the foundational driver of democratic decline, arguing that distributive conflict distorts representation and incentivizes elite capture. Others emphasize institutional integrity, contending that corruption and weakened oversight directly hollow out democratic constraints regardless of economic conditions. A third strand highlights polarization as the key mechanism through which social and institutional tensions are translated into executive aggrandizement.

Despite extensive empirical work, these competing explanations have rarely been tested against one another within a unified analytical framework. As a result, the literature has struggled to determine whether democratic backsliding is primarily a distributive problem, an institutional one, or a consequence of political fragmentation. This unresolved tension limits both theoretical clarity and policy relevance, particularly as contemporary episodes of democratic erosion increasingly occur through legal and procedural means rather than overt authoritarian rupture.

Economic Inequality and Democratic Erosion

A substantial body of research treats economic inequality as a central driver of democratic decline. Classical political economy theories argue that rising inequality incentivizes economic elites to resist redistribution and insulate themselves from democratic accountability, thereby weakening representative institutions (Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). In this account, inequality is not merely a background condition but the foundational force from which other democratic pathologies emerge. As wealth becomes increasingly concentrated, political influence follows, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of elite capture and institutional distortion.

Empirical findings, however, complicate this direct causal narrative. Houle (2009) demonstrates that inequality significantly hinders democratic consolidation, even while having limited effects on democratic transition or outright regime breakdown. Similarly, Bienstman (2023) finds that inequality erodes political trust, a critical precondition for democratic participation, without necessarily precipitating immediate institutional collapse. These studies suggest that inequality may weaken democracy gradually by undermining its social foundations rather than by directly dismantling formal institutions.

At the mass level, inequality has been shown to depress political engagement and skew electoral responsiveness. Solt (2008) finds that rising income disparity disproportionately reduces participation among lower-income citizens, reinforcing cycles of disengagement and political exclusion. Anderson and Beramendi (2014) further argue that electoral responsiveness declines as inequality increases, granting elites disproportionate influence over policy outcomes. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in fragile democracies, where inequality coincides with weak institutions and limited accountability mechanisms (Rau and Stokes 2024).

Taken together, this literature reveals a central tension. While inequality is widely recognized as corrosive to democratic legitimacy, its effects appear inconsistent and often mediated through institutional conditions such as participation, trust, and elite constraint. Existing studies rarely assess inequality alongside institutional variables within the same empirical model, leaving unresolved whether inequality functions as an independent driver of democratic backsliding or primarily amplifies vulnerabilities that originate elsewhere.

Corruption and Institutional Decay

In contrast to the mixed findings on inequality, the literature on corruption presents a more unified account of democratic erosion. Corruption is widely understood as a direct threat to institutional integrity, accountability, and the rule of law. Treisman (2007) finds that corruption flourishes in environments lacking strong bureaucratic traditions and effective oversight, transforming public office into a vehicle for private gain. Mungiu-Pippidi (2006) extends this argument by conceptualizing systemic corruption as “competitive particularism,” in which elections legitimize entrenched patronage networks rather than constrain them.

Beyond material consequences, corruption profoundly undermines democratic legitimacy. Seligson (2002) shows that widespread perceptions of corruption significantly weaken public support for democratic regimes, eroding confidence in political institutions. Rose-Ackerman (2003) similarly argues that normalized corruption dissolves the implicit social contract between citizens and the state, replacing expectations of impartial governance with cynicism and disengagement. Even consolidated democracies are not immune. Whitman (2018) warns that when regulatory frameworks fail to constrain market forces, liberal democracies risk allowing profit motives to crowd out public accountability.

As corruption becomes entrenched, its effects compound across institutions. Stephenson (2015) explains that when oversight bodies such as courts and anti-corruption agencies are captured or politicized, mechanisms of horizontal accountability collapse. Institutions designed to safeguard democracy instead become instruments of elite insulation. In this sense, corruption is not an episodic deviation from democratic norms but a systematic process that replaces legal-rational authority with loyalty, favoritism, and impunity. Once embedded, corruption directly accelerates autocratization by shielding executives from scrutiny and weakening institutional constraints.

<u>Political Polarization and Democratic Breakdown</u>

Political polarization has emerged as an increasingly salient driver of democratic decline, particularly in contemporary democracies. While ideological disagreement is a normal feature of democratic competition, extreme polarization undermines democratic functioning by eroding trust, cooperation, and institutional restraint. Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021) argue that intense polarization lowers the perceived costs of norm violation by allowing leaders to frame institutional erosion as an expression of popular mandate.

Affective polarization, characterized by emotional hostility between partisan groups, is especially damaging. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) demonstrate that partisans increasingly view political opponents as social enemies, weakening tolerance and democratic forbearance. In such environments, compromise becomes politically costly, legislative deliberation gives way to obstruction, and incentives for cross-party cooperation collapse. These dynamics affect not only voters but also political elites, who face pressure to prioritize partisan loyalty over institutional norms.

Polarization also undermines the legitimacy of democratic institutions themselves. Reiljan (2020) finds that citizens in highly polarized societies are less likely to view democratic institutions as fair or authoritative. Fragmented information environments further intensify these effects. Epistemic echo chambers narrow public discourse and facilitate the spread of disinformation, reinforcing affective divisions and political mistrust (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). As polarization paralyzes legislatures and courts, executives frequently expand their authority, exploiting institutional deadlock to bypass oversight (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021).

Recent research highlights digital disinformation and populist rhetoric as accelerants of polarization. Algorithmic amplification intensifies affective divides, while populist leaders weaponize polarization to delegitimize institutions and concentrate power. Although these dynamics fall outside the scope of the present quantitative model, they represent important complementary mechanisms through which polarization contributes to democratic backsliding.

<u>Convergence and Unresolved Tensions</u>

While inequality, corruption, and polarization can each undermine democracy independently, their convergence poses the greatest threat to democratic stability. Cassani and Tomini (2020) conceptualize autocratization as a gradual regression from liberal norms carried out through formally legal mechanisms. Unlike traditional coups, contemporary authoritarian shifts preserve electoral and institutional façades while hollowing out their substantive content. Bermeo (2016) similarly identifies executive aggrandizement and electoral manipulation as central strategies of democratic backsliding, particularly effective when institutions have already been weakened by structural stressors.

Yet despite broad agreement that these forces interact, the literature remains divided over which constitutes the primary engine of democratic erosion. Some accounts continue to privilege distributive conflict, while others emphasize institutional decay or political fragmentation. Few studies directly compare these explanations within the same empirical framework, leaving unresolved whether democratic backsliding is fundamentally driven by economic inequality or by failures of institutional integrity and political coordination. Other institutional factors, such as executive power concentration and media freedom, have also been shown to affect democratic resilience, but fall outside the scope of the present analysis.

This study addresses this gap by evaluating inequality, corruption, and polarization simultaneously within a cross-national regression framework. By directly comparing distributive and institutional explanations, it seeks to clarify the relative weight of these competing logics and to assess whether democratic erosion is best understood as a problem of economic distribution or of institutional resilience.

Hypotheses

Building on this foundation, I anticipate that economic inequality, corruption, and political polarization each exert a measurable and negative influence on the quality of liberal democracy. The literature reviewed above presents competing explanations for democratic backsliding, variously emphasizing distributive conflict, institutional decay, and political fragmentation. The following hypotheses test these competing claims by evaluating the relative effects of inequality, corruption, and polarization within a single empirical model.

My first hypothesis (H_1) is that countries with higher levels of economic inequality will exhibit weaker democratic institutions and lower liberal democracy index scores. The null hypothesis for this relationship is that economic inequality does not affect liberal democracy. My second hypothesis (H_2) is that greater perceived corruption will correlate with diminished institutional accountability and public trust, ultimately degrading the level of liberal democracy. The null hypothesis here is that corruption does not affect the level of liberal democracy. My third hypothesis (H_3) states that higher degrees of political polarization will be associated with lower levels of liberal democracy. Conversely, the null hypothesis states that polarization has no effect on liberal democratic outcomes. These hypotheses reflect patterns suggested throughout the scholarly literature. They also provide a foundation for the statistical models used in the subsequent analysis. By testing these assumptions through cross-national quantitative data, I aim to evaluate whether the mechanisms outlined above consistently correspond with measurable democratic decline.

Furthermore, for transparency, preliminary model specifications including GDP per capita, education, and regional controls produced substantively similar coefficients for corruption and polarization. However, in order to preserve sample size and maximize cross-national coverage, these controls are excluded from the final specification. By testing the hypotheses above, this paper evaluates not only the direct effects of structural variables but also their relative strength and theoretical salience on a broader scale, something that would not be attainable if variables had been controlled for.

Data, Indicators, and Operationalization

To complement the regression-based hypothesis testing, this study proposes a predictive model for estimating the strength of liberal democracy across countries based on three structural variables: income inequality, corruption, and political polarization. This model serves both as a theory-grounded framework and a potential forecasting tool, formalizing how these factors interact to influence liberal democratic outcomes.

The model takes the form of a multiple linear regression equation:

$$\textbf{Predicted Liberal Democracy} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\textbf{Gini Index}) + \beta_2(\textbf{Corruption Score}) + \beta_3(\textbf{Polarization Score})$$

Each variable captures a distinct dimension of democratic integrity and is operationalized based on theoretically justified and institutionally validated indicators. To ensure clearer and more intuitive interpretation of regression results, the scales for the corruption and polarization variables were reversed. In their original forms, higher scores on both the anti-corruption and party system stability indices indicated stronger institutional performance. However, for the purposes of this analysis, these variables were transformed so that higher values now reflect weaker anti-corruption enforcement and greater political instability. This adjustment allows for a consistent directional interpretation across all three predictors, where increases in each independent variable signal greater structural risk to liberal democracy. This change enhances the theoretical coherence of the model and simplifies both the statistical interpretation and communication of findings.

Gini Index – Income Inequality

The Gini Index, sourced from the World Bank and coded in the Quality of Governance 2024 dataset as *wdi_gini*, represents the degree of income inequality within a society. It ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 100 (perfect inequality) and reflects disparities in income distribution across the population. The index is based on household survey data and is widely regarded as the most consistent and internationally comparable measure of income inequality.

In the context of this model, higher Gini values are expected to correspond with lower liberal democracy scores, as extensive research indicates that inequality erodes civic trust, reduces political participation, and increases elite capture of democratic institutions (Boix 2003; Houle 2009). Societies with pronounced income gaps often experience weakened accountability, skewed representation, and greater public disillusionment with democratic norms. As such, the Gini Index functions here as a proxy for the socio-economic foundations of democratic legitimacy.

Corruption Score – Institutional Integrity

The corruption variable is derived from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index's (BTI's) Anti-Corruption Policy score (bti_acp), which originally ranged from 1 (ineffective policy) to 10 (strong enforcement). For this study, the scale was reversed so that higher values now indicate weaker anti-corruption performance and greater institutional decay.

This transformation aligns with the theoretical expectation that rising corruption undermines democratic accountability. Countries scoring higher on this reversed scale are more likely to exhibit selective prosecution, politicized enforcement, and entrenched patronage networks. Conversely, lower values signal robust institutional safeguards, rule-of-law enforcement, and transparent governance. In the model, increases in this variable should correlate with declining liberal democracy, as corruption weakens institutional legitimacy and enables executive overreach.

Polarization Score – Party System Volatility

The third independent variable is based on the BTI's Party System Stability index (bti_ps), which evaluates how institutionalized and coherent a country's party system is. Originally scored from 1 (unstable) to 10 (stable), this variable was also reversed so that higher values now represent greater party system volatility and systemic polarization.

Although not a direct measure of affective polarization, this reversed indicator reflects the structural conditions that foster political fragmentation and instability. Countries with higher reversed scores often experience personalist leadership, populist realignment, or electoral volatility, all of which strain democratic institutions. In contrast, stable systems tend to support compromise, institutional continuity, and democratic resilience. A negative relationship between polarization and democracy is therefore expected in this model.

Model Application

This predictive model translates theoretical insights into a formal analytical framework. Once regression coefficients are estimated, the equation can be used to project a country's liberal democracy score based on its structural conditions. The model allows for scenario-based simulations, such as estimating the impact of a five-point increase in corruption on democratic performance. This utility makes the model valuable not only for academic understanding but also for policy diagnostics and early-warning systems in fragile democracies. The coefficients will be derived in the analysis section that follows.

Analysis of Findings

To ensure the reliability of this model, multicollinearity was evaluated among the independent variables using tolerance statistics. Tolerance values for income inequality, corruption, and polarization were all above 0.75, indicating that the predictors do not exhibit problematic multicollinearity and contribute distinct explanatory value to the model.

The model demonstrates strong performance, with an adjusted R-squared value of 0.623. This indicates that the three independent variables explain 62.3 percent of the variation in liberal democracy index scores across countries.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.798[a]	.637	.623	.129

a. Predictors: (Constant), ps_flipped, Gini index, acp_flipped

The dataset comprises 81 countries, representing diverse regions and regime types. Many highly developed nations are excluded due to data limitations in the corruption and polarization indices, which do not fully cover advanced democracies. While the exclusion of many advanced democracies limits global generalizability, the remaining sample is analytically appropriate for examining democratic backsliding, as it disproportionately includes regimes where institutional erosion is most likely to occur. These 81 nations span a wide spectrum of regime types, from entrenched autocracies to consolidated democracies, and are disproportionately situated in regions where democratic institutions tend to be weaker, corruption more prevalent, and party systems less institutionalized. By focusing on these countries, the study provides particularly relevant insights into the dynamics of democratic backsliding in contexts where structural pressures are most likely to manifest. Nevertheless, future research should incorporate a broader set of developed democracies to assess the robustness of these patterns across a more globally representative sample.

Among the predictors, corruption stands out as the strongest and most statistically significant. The unstandardized coefficient is -0.061, indicating that a one-point increase on the ten-point corruption scale corresponds to a 0.061-point decrease in a country's liberal democracy index score, holding other factors constant. Additionally, the t-statistic for this variable is -6.891, and the p-value is <0.001, indicating a highly statistically significant relationship.

The standardized Beta coefficient for corruption is -0.537, which allows for a comparison of effect sizes across variables measured on different scales. A one standard deviation increase in corruption is associated with a 0.537 standard deviation decrease in democratic quality, which is a considerable effect. This finding supports the second hypothesis and aligns with theories that emphasize the corrosive effects of corruption on democratic institutions. As scholars like Rose-Ackerman and Mungiu-Pippidi have argued, when governments fail to enforce integrity mechanisms, judicial independence weakens, elite impunity rises, and democratic erosion accelerates.

Additionally, polarization seems to also be a statistically significant predictor. The coefficient of -0.049 suggests that a one-point increase on the ten-point polarization scale results in a 0.049-point decrease in the liberal democracy index, controlling for other variables. The t-statistic is -5.420, which again far exceeds the conventional threshold for significance, and the p-value is below 0.001.

The standardized Beta coefficient for this variable is -0.414, indicating that its impact is somewhat less than that of corruption but still meaningful. A one standard deviation increase in polarization yields nearly a half standard deviation decrease in democratic quality. This supports the third hypothesis, which posits that greater political polarization undermines democratic performance. Empirical and theoretical work has shown that volatile party systems tend to fuel populism, paralyze legislative processes, and weaken checks on executive power. These dynamics, in turn, erode the foundations of liberal democracy.

On the other hand, in contrast to most academic literature, income inequality does not show a statistically significant effect in this model. Its coefficient is 0.002, and the t-statistic is 1.180, below the standard threshold for significance. The corresponding p-value is 0.241, meaning we cannot reject the null hypothesis for this variable. Although the standardized Beta is 0.084, indicating a weak positive relationship, its effect is neither strong nor statistically significant.

This outcome diverges from the first hypothesis, which anticipated that greater economic inequality would weaken democratic institutions. The lack of significance may stem from multiple factors, including the limitations of the Gini Index, which captures income distribution but may overlook more politically relevant dimensions of inequality, such as wealth concentration, perceived injustice, or access to political influence. Alternatively, the effect of inequality may be conditional or indirect, manifesting only in conjunction with other structural or institutional weaknesses. While inequality remains theoretically important, its impact may not be linear or direct in all settings. This finding is consistent with accounts that treat inequality as a background condition that magnifies institutional vulnerability rather than as an autonomous driver of democratic erosion.

The resulting regression equation is as follows:

Predicted Liberal Democracy = 0.964 + 0.002(Economic Inequality) - 0.061(Corruption) - 0.049(Polarization)

Although the constant term (0.964) is not the focus of interpretation, it mathematically anchors the model. The two institutional variables, corruption and polarization, provide the strongest and most reliable explanatory power. For example, a country that reduces its corruption score by three points and its polarization score by two points could expect a 0.281-point increase in its liberal democracy index score. On a 0 to 1 scale, such an increase is substantial and could mark the difference between a hybrid regime and a consolidated democracy.

Overall, these results indicate that institutional integrity plays a central role in sustaining liberal democracy, while distributive conditions alone appear insufficient to explain contemporary patterns of democratic backsliding. Anti-corruption enforcement and party system stability both exert statistically significant and theoretically consistent effects on democratic quality. Income inequality, though conceptually important, does not emerge as a significant direct predictor in this model. These findings suggest that future efforts to bolster democracy should prioritize institutional reform, accountability, and political coherence to prevent erosion and promote democratic resilience.

Conclusion

The empirical analysis provides clear answers to the hypotheses advanced in this study. The results do not support the expectation that economic inequality directly undermines liberal democracy (H1), but they strongly support the hypotheses that corruption (H2) and political polarization (H3) significantly erode democratic quality.

This study sought to uncover the structural forces driving democratic backsliding in an age where liberal democracy can no longer be taken for granted. Through a cross-national regression analysis and a synthesis of political theory and empirical evidence, the findings highlight a clear pattern: institutional strength, not merely economic conditions, is the most decisive factor in democratic resilience. Countries that effectively combat corruption and maintain stable, coherent party systems are significantly more likely to uphold the principles of liberal democracy. These results validate long-standing theories while offering fresh empirical clarity.

At the same time, the limited impact of income inequality, despite its prominence in democratic theory, invites a more nuanced interpretation. Rather than dismissing inequality as irrelevant, this finding suggests that its influence may be conditional, unfolding through other mechanisms like political disaffection, institutional decay, or polarization. Future research should therefore investigate these mediating pathways and employ longitudinal designs to trace how structural pressures evolve into institutional breakdown over time.

Expanding the dataset to include more countries, particularly more stable democracies, especially developed Western ones, would further enhance the external validity of these insights. In addition, a deeper examination of how political institutions interact with digital disinformation, populist rhetoric, and civic disengagement could illuminate the evolving architecture of modern autocracy.

From a policy standpoint, the implications are clear. Democracy is not only about elections or economic prosperity; it is about the integrity of institutions. Strengthening anti-corruption frameworks and reinforcing party system coherence are among the most direct and effective levers available to governments, donors, and civil society actors seeking to protect democratic governance. These are policy domains where reform is both feasible and impactful and where failure to act risks inviting further democratic decline.

The broader takeaway is sobering yet hopeful. Democratic erosion is not inevitable. It is enabled when institutions falter and when political actors exploit the cracks within them. But it is also preventable. This research affirms that liberal democracy, while fragile, can be fortified through deliberate institutional design and vigilant reform. In a time of rising authoritarian temptations, the choice remains ours: to let democratic norms erode quietly, or to defend them while we still can.

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DOKDO IS OUR LAND: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND EVERYDAY REMEMBRANCE IN SOUTH KOREA

Henry Su

Abstract
The Dokdo/Takeshima islets are at the center of a long-standing maritime dispute between South Korea and Japan. In South Korea, the Dokdo issue occupies a place of prominence in everyday life and is an instantly recognizable symbol of the nation. This research applies a discourse-theoretical analytical approach (DTA) to a variety of Dokdo-themed products, souvenirs, museums, and exhibits to investigate how the Dokdo issue is produced, reproduced, and consumed in everyday life. Building on scholarly studies of nation branding, material culture, collective memory, and nationalism, it reveals common themes and discursive representations of Dokdo across objects and sites of memory. It reveals a complex network of marketized relationships between national and subnational state institutions, commercial firms, non-profit organizations, designers, and consumers who participate in cultural policies and branding campaigns. It argues that Dokdo discourses create linkages between ecological conservationism, Korean nationalism, local tourism initiatives, and anti-Japanese sentiment; employs marketing strategies to create a coherent Dokdo 'brand image'; and repackages the territorial dispute as suitable for younger generations and international audiences.

Keywords: Dokdo, South Korea, nationalism, souvenirs, collective memory, nation branding, conservationism, maritime dispute

If you are one of the 7.3 million people (Kyung-don 2022) who ride the subway in Seoul daily, take a moment to lift your eyes from your phone screen or the scalp of the bald man across from you and watch the video screens next to the route information. You might be surprised to see archival documents floating across the screen, interspersed with long shots of the South Korean flag and aerial footage of two craggy rocks jutting out from the sea. The two-minute-long videos cite historical evidence and stir patriotic sentiments to argue that the islands of Dokdo[1] are irrefutably Korean territory (Sherzod Muminov [@msherzodm] 2024). When I pointed out that such aggressive videos were a rather strange choice of ambiance for the train, my Korean friends shrugged and told me that they just tune it out.

[1] I use the Korean name for the islands because my research focuses on South Korea, where the islands are exclusively referred to by this name.

In South Korea, the Dokdo islet is as ubiquitous of a symbol as the national flag. On an afternoon's walk around Seoul, you might encounter restaurants selling "Dokdo shrimp" (Hyejin Kwon 2023), travel agencies advertising Dokdo travel packages (VeryTour, n.d.), souvenir stands and boutiques selling Dokdo merchandise, and Dokdo-themed cosmetics (Round Lab, n.d.-a). In schools, students learn about Dokdo from elementary school until high school. The 1982 pop song "Dokdo is Our Land" is a popular choice in school choirs and karaoke parlors alike. Dokdo is a pervasive symbol of Korean identity, a cultural phenomenon, and a source of national pride for many.

Dokdo, or Takeshima, or the Liancourt Rocks, depending on who you ask, are a small group of rocky, unpopulated islands in the East Sea about halfway between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese mainland. The islands are at the center of a long-standing maritime dispute between Japan and South Korea dating back to the end of the Pacific War. South Korean scholars point to a range of Joseon-era documents as evidence that the islands were historically administered by Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2013). However, the Empire of Japan claimed the islands in 1905 as part of its gradual colonization of Korea. After the Pacific War, the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco liberated the Korean peninsula, but Japan was not made to relinquish its claim to the islands. In 1952, the South Korean government acquired *de facto* control of Dokdo by establishing a permanent coast guard station.

In the decades since, Japan's foreign ministry has regularly protested the "illegal occupation" of the islands (2014). Korea's foreign ministry maintains the position that there is no dispute since the islands are inherently Korean territory (n.d.). Both countries' foreign ministries actively promote their policy positions, frequently impacting public sentiment and diplomatic relations between the two. Ji Young Kim identifies an "elite-led" model of Takeshima activism in Japan, led by conservative political elites. Kim ties official Japanese narratives of Takeshima to postwar Japanocentrism, or *kokutai,* rooted in an imperial-era hierarchical view of other countries in Asia. Conversely, Kim observes a mass-led process of Dokdo symbolic politics in South Korea. Kim characterizes popular antipathy towards Japan as an expression of "a sense of victimhood from Japanese aggression" (2014a, 35–36, 38–39). Mass outrage arose in South Korea in response to the Shimane prefectural government in Japan promulgating a "Takeshima Day" celebration in 2005, to the point that the Roh administration ended a period of rapprochement with Japan (J. Y. Kim 2014a, 51).

The arguments made to perpetuate the Dokdo dispute are multi-layered. Ji-young Lee and Jaehyun Lee observe that "Dokdo has become a symbol of Korean identity or 'Koreanness'" through cultural narratives generated by a variety of state, commercial, and grassroots sources (2019, 70, 72). The Korean government has made various claims to justify the energy devoted to perpetuating the dispute, ranging from the value of fishing rights in the surrounding Exclusive Economic Zone, to potential oil and natural gas reserves, and even connected the dispute to ecological conservation of the islands' indigenous wildlife.

My research investigates various symbolic representations and narratives within the broad cultural understanding of Dokdo to answer the following question: <u>How is the Dokdo issue recreated, sustained, and consumed in everyday life in South Korea?</u> This research may have implications for the advancement of historical reconciliation in territorial disputes in Northeast Asia and diplomatic normalization between Japan and Korea. The majority of existing studies on the Korean side of the Dokdo issue focus on narratives generated by elites to support the South Korean government's policy vis-à-vis Japan. My research seeks to fill a lacuna in Dokdo research by interrogating a more diverse range of grassroots narratives that intertwine with government policies.

Michael Billig's oft-cited book *Banal Nationalism* seeks to answer the question of how everyday individuals engage with nationalism on a daily basis (1995, 43–46). Prior research on Korean nationalism has focused on what Billig terms "hot" moments, such as protests, public holidays, and highly visible acts of flag-waving (1995, 45). This study focuses on the "cool", or subliminal and mundane acts when individuals construct an understanding of their collective national identity. These moments emerge from the rhythms of everyday life, like buying souvenirs in a gift shop, visiting a museum, or shopping for online goods.

This research also contributes to the discussion of how the phenomenon of nationalism is grounded in everyday action and applies this analysis to grassroots actors engaging with the Dokdo issue. Han Gil-soo analyzes Korean grassroots nationalism using Billig's theory and selective coding of news media and online blogs as a data set (2023a, 61). Han contends that people connect to nationalism through both the cultural structure of society and everyday actions carried out with individual agency (2023a, 31). My research focuses on employing Han's theoretical and methodological approach, with attention paid to both structural aspects of Dokdo nationalism and the individual practices and relationships which make up "personal nationalism".

Literature Review

My research brings together three adjacent fields of study which create analytical models to understand how the nation-state is produced, reproduced, and consumed by its members: nationalism, memorialization, and objects of remembrance. I have divided the literature on nationalism into two primary categories: elite, or top-down nationalism, and grassroots, or bottom-up nationalism. Memorials and objects of remembrance constitute material culture in everyday life and popular culture which sustain personal nationalisms. With these theoretical groupings in mind, I undertake an analysis of the social reality of nationalism to individual actors which is produced and sustained through memorials and objects of remembrance.

Nationalism

Scholars understand modern nationalism as a social movement closely associated with liberal philosophies of nationality and the nation-state (Miscevic 2023). However, scholarly opinions diverge in identifying the source of nationalism as a social movement and degree of agency of various actors within society. I divide the scholarship on nationalism into two categories: elite nationalism, which studies nationalism as a top-down phenomenon, and grassroots nationalism, which focuses on the role of ordinary people in producing and sustaining nationalism from the bottom-up. Though each category of scholar generally acknowledges Eric Hobsbawm's dictum that nationalism is constructed from both above and below (1992, 10), their understanding of nationalism informs their departure point for analyzing the broader social phenomenon.

Among elite nationalists, nationalism is created and sustained by the actions of political elites, which supports a top-down analytical approach. In his analysis of nationalism over the lifetime of the Taiwanese nation-state, Timothy Ka-ying Wong identifies state-led nation-building as the source of Taiwanese ethnic nationalism, and elite intellectuals as the leaders of the popular movement to embrace the nation-state (2001, 185–86, 191). Scholars of elite nationalism point to political and intellectual elites as the producers of nationalism through persuasion (Snyder 2000), policy (Wong 2001), or manipulation of social structures such as ethnic or class divisions (Erdem 2017). These scholars position elites as agents who mobilize ordinary people to shape expressions of popular nationalism according to their rational interests (Whitmeyer 2002, 324).

A particular subset of scholars studying elite nationalism focus on cultural policies of nation branding. Scholars of nation branding identify the marketing techniques of commercial branding as tools employed by national governments seeking to construct a competitive national identity in globalized neoliberal identity politics. Melissa Aronczyk's book *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* studies the emergence of nation branding as a "professional transnational practice" (2013, 3) involving national governments, a professional class of marketing consultants, and globalized citizens in projects to transform collective process of national identity formation. Aronczyk evaluates a variety of marketing tactics and media campaigns (postcards, advertisements, products and their brand identities) servicing both domestic and international audiences, especially the tourism economy. Petra Steiger studies the "Good Idea Slovakia" nation branding project, arguing that the Slovakian cultural narratives introduced by the campaign "re-narrate" Slovakia as a "modern and progressive country" (2017, 205). For scholars of nation branding, the project to transform dominant narratives of the nation competes with the international gaze; nation branding transcends marketing strategies and cultural policies to operate within both national and global discursive liberal identity politics (Steiger 2017, 206).

The other category of scholars, grassroots nationalists, emphasize the agency of ordinary individuals. However, their analysis is conducted from the bottom-up, centering on the role of grassroots actors in producing and sustaining nationalism. While recognizing the influence of elite manipulation and structural concerns, these scholars focus on social processes taking place between non-elite individuals on an everyday basis which produce and reproduce nationalism. Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism focuses on the "unwaved flag": everyday symbols which unconsciously perpetuate the nation in the routines of daily life (1995, 41, 42; Déloye 2013). Rather than emphasizing the influence of ideas disseminated by elites, banal nationalism asserts that everyday symbolic reinforcement of the nation-state sustains nationalism. Other bottom-up scholars contest the influence of top-down nationalism on individuals, who may differ in their perception of the nation. Anthony Cohen's theory of everyday nationalism asserts that individuals form a relationship to nationalism based on their localized, personal experiences, influenced by the various identities (e.g. class, race, gender, religion) to which each member of the nation may belong (1996). Scholars of grassroots nationalism adapt these models to recognize and center the agency of individual actors, which informs their approach to understanding nationalism as a social movement. Another study by Adina Zemanek explores the elite phenomenon of nation branding in Taiwan from a bottom-up perspective, contextualizing the work of independent designers and commercial firms within a complex network of official institutions and cultural policies. Zemanek observes that nation branding privileges certain narratives of the nation while crowding out others, creating an entangled commercial space that grassroots actors navigate (2018).

In summary, the two scholarly categories of nationalism I have identified are unified in their understanding of nationalism as a social phenomenon influenced from both the top-down and bottom-up. However, their analyses depart in their expression of individual agency: either expressions of nationalism are shaped by elites, or individuals produce and sustain nationalism in their everyday interactions and unique relationships with the nation. Previous studies of nation branding have focused on elite actors' role in national identity formation. Grassroots nationalism remains an underutilized approach, “particularly so in the context of Asian society” (G.-S. Han 2023a, 34). My research seeks to understand the interactions and linkages between elite and grassroots actors in Dokdo nationalism. I investigate cultural policies and Dokdo nation branding from elite sources, and survey a range of commercial firms and designers informed by Billig’s banal nationalism and Adina Zemanek’s grassroots approach.

Memorialization

The second field my project adapts is the study of memorialization, or how memories and symbols of the nation are constructed, contested, and enshrined through monuments, memorials, museums, and commemorative events. The study of memorialization draws heavily from the theory of collective memory, which asserts that memory is created and sustained through socialization and communication (Halbwachs and Coser 1992). This literature combines social processes of memory in the nation-state with the study of physical spaces in everyday life, which makes it a good fit for a bottom-up approach to analyzing nationalism.

Scholars of memorialization are concerned with the creation of *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory, which shape the processes of remembering the nation and representing its identity (Ben-Amos 1993; Saunders 2018; Winter 2014). Jacques Nora’s definition of *lieux de memoire* abstracts the material reality of the site, instead emphasizing the “symbolic aura” assigned to a memorial or ritual (Nora 1989, 19). Using Nora’s definition, I expand the phenomena of memorialization to include sites as mundane and everyday as a diorama or informational exhibit.

For scholars in this field, memorialization is closely aligned with the formation of national identity. Avner Ben-Amos studies four prominent Parisian monuments: the Pantheon, the Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Notre-Dame Cathedral, finding representations of the nation in monumental imagery. Ben-Amos identifies state-sponsored ceremonies as the primary source of meaning-making in his case study, revealing an important distinction between the types of memory (1993, 55). Jan Assmann creates two distinct categories of memory: cultural memory, which is supported by institutions and favors an elitist participatory structure; and communicative memory, which is sustained through diffuse, everyday communicative practices (2008, 117). This dichotomy of memories mirrors the elite-grassroots distinction within the field of nationalism, and each group’s mutual influence on the other.

While monuments and memorials tend to embody elite-sponsored narratives of cultural memory, they also leave room for individual interpretations. Ben-Amos extends the notion of monumental memory to individual spectators, positing that monuments enable observers to identify themselves with the “large and remote” concept of the nation (1993, 53). Individual interpretations of communicative memory derived from engaging with *lieux de memoire* can supplement the institutionalized body of cultural memory, connecting experiences, real, or imagined, with the memorialized place.

Scholars of memorialization also evaluate the medium of transmission and aesthetic qualities of *lieux de memoire.* Anna Saunders, in her study of memorialization processes in the former German Democratic Republic, emphasizes the “highly interactive” relationship between cultural media and memory (2018, 32). Scholars of memorialization emphasize that the choice of medium has a large influence on the constitution and transmission of cultural and communicative memory. Saunders’ study also emphasizes *ars memoriae*, or the association between imagery and imagined place in memorialization. By incorporating analysis of the physical reality of *lieux de memoire*, scholars can provide insight into material culture, imagery, and associations with memory and individual identity produced by memorial sites.

My project engages the literature on memorialization by adopting Nora's definition of *lieux de memoire* to select a variety of Dokdo memorials which range from dioramas and scale models to grand memorial halls, and share the "symbolic aura" of association with Dokdo and the nation. I employ Assmann's categories of cultural and communicative memory to distinguish overlapping processes of elitist cultural institutions and diffuse processes of memorialization which occur simultaneously at *lieux de memoire*. Finally, I employ common techniques of aesthetic and media cultural inquiry to analyze the symbolic content of Dokdo memorials.

Objects of Remembrance

The third field of scholarship my project engages is the study of objects of remembrance. This field also involves the study of memory in everyday life, focusing on the vast array of objects which make up our physical reality and material culture. They take many different forms and functions, whether instrumental, ornamental, decorative, religious, or symbolic (Edensor 2002, 103). Scholars of material culture argue that even the most mundane of objects carry a communicative potential and acquire cultural meanings from "uses, transactions, attributions, and emotional attachments" (Zarzycka and Mogul 2015, 7).

Scholars of material culture focus on souvenirs as objects with strong linkages to the process of remembering (Zarzycka and Mogul 2015, 9). Adina Zemanek's study of Taiwanese tourist souvenirs finds that souvenir paraphernalia such as coasters, magnets, bookmarks, and postcards encode "individual place-related experiences" (2017; Hornstein 2016, 11, 56) and symbolic representations of the national heritage. Critically, Zemanek finds that the places and things depicted within souvenir objects of remembrance become monumentalized as *lieux de memoire,* referring to Nora's theory of cultural memory (2017, 15). Peter Clericuzio's study of souvenirs depicting the "lost territories" of Alsace-Lorraine in France following the Franco-Prussian War finds that popular commodities like postcards and postcards created emblems of national identity and fixed Alsace-Lorraine as a *lieu de memoire* in the French cultural memory (2015). Zemanek and Clericuzio analyze the material culture surrounding mass-produced commodities, kitsch, and artisan works to extract and encode references to cultural memory and nationalism.

Scholars of objects of remembrance also map out networks of interactions where objects are produced, sold, bought, used, and shared in everyday life. Objects of remembrance like souvenirs, ephemera, and print media can be mass-produced, but so are artisanal works and crafts which create aesthetics of national identity. Andrea Peach's study of the craft industry in 1970s Scotland maps out a network of relationships between consumers, artisans, the tourism industry, and private and government organizations. Peach argues that private businesses and the government's Department of Trade and Industry supported the creation of a unified Scottish identity by adopting traditional crafts as a symbol of the nation (Peach 2007, 247). Artisans and Scotland's craft industry benefitted from tourism spurred by an increased demand for goods that "authenticate the tourist experience" (2007, 248) through their association with the nation. Peach's study extracts the dynamic, transactional relationships between different elements of society in the production and consumption of souvenir objects of remembrance. These relationships are personal, but also support the diffusion of national identity and cultural memory. Mapping the associations individuals make with objects of remembrance, such as associations with *lieux de memoire* and qualities of the national identity are essential to understanding the material culture of the nation.

Like scholars of monumentalization, assessing the physical and aesthetic qualities of objects of remembrance is an important subject of inquiry. Clericuzio's study focuses on the arts and artists producing emblems of the nation, drawing from art history and symbology to map out common representations of the nation (2015, 176–80).Other scholars situate souvenirs and objects of remembrance in processes of artistic modernity and novel techniques of artistic production and commodification (Reid 2020).

Overall, scholars in this group emphasize the multifaceted nature of material culture, adopting a multidisciplinary approach incorporating art history, design technique, economics, psychology, and memory to conduct their analysis. My project engages this literature in my analysis of souvenir objects of remembrance related to the Dokdo issue. These souvenirs are commonly found in museum gift shops, boutiques, stationery stores, and shopping centers in Korea. Applying an analysis of material culture to South Korean national identity constitutes a novel contribution to the field and new approach to understanding nationalism.

Theory

This project draws from three distinct literatures which are under the umbrella of memory studies. Scholars of nationalism study the structures, networks of relationships, and actor-agency which produce, reproduce, and sustain a social movement of remembering the nation. To fill a lacuna in the analysis of Dokdo nationalism in South Korea, my project adopts a bottom-up approach. Within this subfield, I use Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism, and Anthony Cohen's theory of everyday nationalism to analyze the ways in which individuals interact with the nation in everyday contexts.

Building on this theoretical basis, I utilize approaches from the fields of memorialization and objects of remembrance to map out the social and physical realities which individuals inhabit. Scholars of memorialization seek to understand the relationships individuals form with *lieux de memoire*. I apply their analysis of commemorative practices, aesthetic qualities, and physical space to a diverse dataset of Dokdo monuments.

Finally, I also adopt the grassroots approach to memory in my analysis of the material culture of Dokdo objects of remembrance. This field's approach overlaps significantly with the theoretical basis of memorialization studies, but places emphasis on social interactions with the world of objects in everyday life. I apply their multidisciplinary approach to souvenir objects of remembrance associated with Dokdo, mapping out relational networks, symbolic representations of the nation, and aesthetic qualities.

My project unites these theoretical approaches to analyze how South Korean nationalism is produced, reproduced, and sustained among individuals in everyday life and banal contexts. Variables of interest to this study include museums, monuments, marketing, souvenirs, and elite narratives and cultural policies. Employing a grassroots approach, I seek to understand the effect of these objects, places, and spaces on mass politics and popular narratives of Dokdo and Koreanness.

Methodology

My research adopts an interpretive approach to examine how the cultural phenomenon of Dokdo nationalism is produced, consumed, and proliferates in everyday life. At the heart of interpretive research is the drive to create knowledge grounded in specific context. Employing Michael Billig and Anthony Cohen's theories of banal and everyday nationalism, my project analyzes the elite discourses, grassroots participation, consumption patterns, and commercial linkages which sustain the Dokdo movement (Billig 1995; Cohen 2000). I draw from methods of analysis employed by scholars of memorialization and objects of memory (Zemanek 2017; Smith 2016). I supplement my analysis of the material reality with an exploration of the ways in which marketing, cultural memory, and politics intersect within the Dokdo movement. Cultural narratives of Dokdo in the national imagination are created by governments, non-profits, private firms, and individuals who express their vision of Dokdo and the Korean nation as producers, consumers, and tourists. I also consider the methodological tradition of highly contextualized interpretivist research and its appropriateness for this project.

Using Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism, Adina Zemanek approaches the analysis of souvenir objects by treating them as texts with multiple embedded meanings. By treating objects as discursive texts, visual qualities, form, and practices involving objects can function as vehicles of discourse (2017, 10). My research takes the form of a discourse analysis with a approach to build on prior studies of Dokdo nationalism in South Korea. Using the approach of discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA) defined by Kevin Dunn and Iver Neumann, my research is predicated on the concept that "'reality' is produced and made understandable only through discourse" (2016, 39), and seeks to map discursive structures and relationships through which the nation is constructed in material culture. My research differentiates between the various meanings sites of memory and objects attain in a constitutive network of relationships formed by individuals.

My study of Dokdo monuments and memorialization also adopts an interpretivist approach to discourse analysis. Like studies of objects of memory, monuments are treated as discursive texts with multiple, layered meanings. Erika Doss's study of American memorial sites focuses on their "processual" meaning, which is "dependent on a variety of social relations" in constant flux based on the opinions and interests of the nation's "multiple publics" (2010, 45). Anthony Cohen's theory of everyday nationalism, which centers the importance of individual identities in influencing one's relationship to the nation, is a strong theoretical basis for mapping the network of relationships centering on the monument (2000). Discursive analyses of monuments tend to be multidimensional and move beyond the place and physicality of a site to encapsulate the process of memorialization. Jay Winter's study of monuments to the Great War in Europe identifies three key stages in the lifetime of a monument: taking form, from its conceptualization to its construction; becoming grounded through dynamic ritual activity which give meaning to the static memorial site through production and continuous reproduction; and in the later life of a monument, its eventual destruction or the forgetting of its original meanings, which Anna Saunders notes may give rise to new meanings (2014; 2018, 46). Recent scholarship in the study of monuments has examined contestation of monuments, revealing confrontations between the meanings assigned to monuments by various publics. My study maps the layered, personalized, processual meanings of monuments in the multiple publics, with a focus on the process of memorialization and construction of meaning throughout monuments.

The multiple narratives and complex linkages between state and grassroots actors necessitate an exploration of how state cultural policies give rise to a variety of messages. Through commissions, cultural and economic development initiatives, and non-profit funding, Dokdo narratives are both regulated and hegemonized, and creatively adapted and exploited by designers and non-profit groups. With this focus in mind, my project adopts an open-source methodological approach to data generation: collecting and analyzing existing media generated by netizens, Dokdo organizations, and private firms.

The online blogosphere affords me access to a large number of corroborative sources generated by Korean netizens. Han Gil-soo's study of Korean grassroots nationalism maps discursive representations of the nation through various online platforms such as YouTube, blogs, and news media. Han notes that such data is abundantly available and records "offline activities" (2023a, 61) such as the consumption of souvenir objects, visits to memorial sites, and other activities of interest to the processes of meaning-making.

According to Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, researcher positionality and access are important considerations when conducting interpretive research with the goal of generating knowledge grounded in context (2011, 67). As a researcher with cultural understanding and language fluency gained during half a decade studying and living in Korea, I began this project with an enhanced degree of contextual and historical knowledge which expanded as I immersed myself in this topic over a year. My analysis involves a high volume of Korean-language textual sources, for which I used my Korean skills and occasional contextual help from native Korean-speaking acquaintances. However, an important aspect of interpretive knowledge generation is what Schwartz-Shea and Yanow term "'stranger-ness'": the ability to approach a subject from a point of view which can explicitly assess what is unexpected about what "situated knowers" might take for granted (2011, 50–51). My external perspective lends me a unique ability to make sense of what new knowledge about the phenomena of nationalism, nation branding, and material culture can be derived from the context of South Korea.

As a researcher based outside of South Korea, my ability to conduct *in situ* evidence generation has been limited. My fieldwork for this project, aside from a few initial encounters with Dokdo monuments in 2024, has taken place in the web pages of product vendors, non-profit organizations, news outlets, and exhibit spaces. I followed the multiple threads contained within Dokdo nationalism across texts in the literal sense, as well as places, spaces, and objects far afield by taking extensive field notes using Obsidian, an open-source note-taking software. Obsidian helpfully includes tools to create active links between documents similar to the hyperlinks found on Wikipedia, which helped me visualize linkages between organizations and track discursive representations common to a wide variety of texts.

As I proceeded through my investigation, I realized that a higher degree of familiarity could only be attained by physically moving within and experiencing these spaces firsthand. A few promotional campaigns and marketing materials are unavailable online, and I spent a long time trying to get legible photos of many informational placards and details. A trip to Gyeongsangbuk-do, Ulleung-do, and Dokdo itself for in-person fieldwork would be an excellent avenue for further research to open wider the contextual window I am peering through. Nevertheless, my project and thinking are informed by a wide range of researchers who have studied cultural phenomena from both within and outside their physical settings.

Sources of Evidence

My research brings together physical sources of evidence and online media to analyze the phenomenon of Dokdo nationalism in contemporary South Korea. I employ three primary types of sources relevant to my analysis: Objects of remembrance, such as souvenirs and other Dokdo products; Monuments, which range from large permanent museum sites to temporary installations and exhibits; and online media sources from blogs, storefronts, news media, and web pages.

I conceptualize the first category, objects of remembrance, based on scholarship which asserts that social processes of historical memory take place on the level of everyday objects (Zarzycka and Mogul 2015, 9; Burke 1997, 45). These include souvenirs, memorabilia, print media, and other objects that are bought or distributed to individuals for personal use. A rudimentary NAVER search for 독도상품 (Dokdo products) yields many dozens of results, ranging from commemorative T-shirts to beauty products to stationery and more. The sheer volume of potential evidence demands a rigorous selection process. I selected a set of online products that are representative of market trends and are directly connected to popular Dokdo activism. I adopt Adina Zemanek's method of studying Taiwanese tourist souvenirs, selecting representative examples based on common aesthetic and discursive elements, with consideration for design philosophy and consumer preference (2017).

A second source of evidence, monuments, is based on a set of Dokdo monuments and museums around the country. A majority of the sites I selected are located in North Gyeongsang Province and Daegu, indicating their connection to regional tourism. The vast majority of Dokdo monuments and museums were constructed in the last fifteen years. Despite my inability to visit these spaces during my study, my work is aided by the vast amount of travel guides, blog posts, and visitor information posted online.

Following my mixed-methodology approach, I will use existing online material published by Korean netizens as done by Han in his study of South Korean grassroots nationalism (2023b, 193). NAVER Blog is extremely popular among people of all ages, and the most popular blogs get millions of hits per month. Anyone can easily publish their own blog, which allows for a wide variety of sources. Utilizing relevant search engine results and hyperlinks, digital sources allow me to map out a network of linkages between Dokdo activists, media outlets, and internet users in South Korea.

Organizational Context

Dokdo Organizations

Souvenirs and memorial sites are embedded in a complex network of monetary exchanges between the state, commercial firms such as architects, manufacturers, and designers, and the multiple publics, who are defined relationally as consumers, visitors, or tourists. Some are members of the nation; others are foreigners; all participate in the project of Dokdo nation-branding at the grassroots level. Some creatives, working as independent designers, also act as grassroots voices contributing their own messages to the national project. To initiate a discussion of Dokdo nation-branding, it is necessary to first explore the complex relationalities which connect state power and cultural policies to the wide variety of Dokdo branding messages via the market.

Cultural policies: National and subnational

Whether for political reasons or otherwise, there is a notable gulf between the kinds of Dokdo activism produced at the national and provincial level in South Korea. In my exploration of Dokdo-oriented non-governmental organizations, I find that the vast majority of active organizations receive funding or material support from the Gyeongsangbuk-do provincial government, while the national Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries support a much narrower range of activity.

At the national level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs primarily engages in diplomatic and research-based Dokdo activism. Aside from its regular petitions to the Japanese foreign ministry and predictable statements of protest when new Japanese school textbooks are published, it also sponsors the activity of the Northeast Asia History Foundation (NAHF), a public organization which conducts "research and analysis on Northeast Asian historical issues and Dokdo-related matters, develops systematic and strategic policies, and implements publicity and education activities as well as exchange and support projects" (2022). The NAHF has sponsored historical research and publishes academic material in support of the official government position on Dokdo since its founding in 2006, but its recent activity has expanded to outreach targeting the general public. The NAHF is the primary sponsor of the Dokdo Museum in Seoul, which underwent major renovations upon its relocation to Yeongdeungpo-gu in 2022. I contend that the format of the current exhibition space shares strong similarities with a new generation of Dokdo museums which were established over the previous decade by organizations in Gyeongsangbuk-do, all of which received major funding from the provincial government.

Dokdo dioramas are installed in six locations in the municipally owned Seoul Metro and at the War Memorial of Korea, administered by the Ministry of National Defense. From June to August 2024, all of the dioramas were removed from public view, inciting widespread public controversy (Joseilbo 2024). Officials cited the need to maintain and relocate the dioramas. Opposition lawmakers and news organizations connected the disappearances to a larger phenomenon of "Dokdo erasure" (Park 2024) on the part of the national government, in which the Yoon administration acted to remove several prominent Dokdo displays, conducted undisclosed joint military exercises between Korea, the US, and Japan near Dokdo, labeled Dokdo as a 'territorial dispute area' in military education materials, and removed mentions of Dokdo from its National Security Strategy whitepaper (Joseilbo 2024). Although the government denied these allegations, the erasure of Dokdo from public spaces and government communications was in step with the Yoon administration's strong efforts to normalize relations with Japan (Funabashi 2023).

The issue of Dokdo became a focal point during the 2025 presidential election, with Democratic Party opposition candidate Lee Jae-myung taking a strong activist role in engaging Japan's foreign ministry (Chae-woon Kim 2025). If Dokdo activism by the national government is constrained by elites' geopolitical ambitions, then the much wider range of Dokdo activism undertaken by the Gyeongsangbuk-do provincial government can be explained by the absence of these constraints at the subnational level.

The Gyeongsangbuk-do provincial government has engaged a wide variety of cultural, commercial, and economic policies and initiatives connected to Dokdo activism. In my mapping of this network of policies, I find that the provincial government occupies a central role in generating commercial activity, promoting tourism, and cultivating public awareness of Dokdo through its engagement with non-profit organizations, commercial firms, and independent designers. The provincial government utilizes a range of tactics which tie market trends and consumer preferences to Dokdo activism through the use of state power.

Funding non-profit organizations

The Gyeongsangbuk-do government funds a variety of organizations which engage in community-based Dokdo activism. Gyeongsangbuk-do and Ulleung-do are primary sponsors of the Dokdo Love Movement Headquarters (독도사랑운동분부), a Seoul-based non-profit which is active in conducting Dokdo outreach. The organization's articles of foundation outline its mission to "strengthen maritime territory sovereignty", conduct research on "sustainability in Dokdo", and promote "systematic education to inform the public of the importance of Dokdo, both domestically and internationally".

The Dokdo Love Movement Headquarters promotes an initiative to develop Dokdo goods (독도그즈) by offering an official "Dokdo Brand Identity Certification Mark" (fig. 1) to products and corporations that "support and love Dokdo". On their webpage, they showcase a variety of products with a Dokdo branding that bear the certification: a convenience store lunch set, office chairs, rice, printer paper, cosmetics, and stationery. These widely available tie-in goods illustrate their connection to Dokdo activism by prominently displaying the mark on their packaging, in lieu of any connection to Dokdo itself outside of branding. In this way, products that defy the typical connection to "individual place-related experiences" are transformed into objects of memory, souvenirs connecting the consumer to the "Dokdo love movement". The act of purchasing a good for sale carrying the mark becomes connected to a national project beyond the boundaries of the convenience store or online storefront.

Fig. 1: The Dokdo BI certification mark (독도BI인증마크) offered by the Dokdo Love Movement Headquarters.

The Dokdo Foundation (독도재단) is a Pohang-based non-profit organization which engages in a wide variety of Dokdo outreach activities and promotes tourism to Ulleung-do. From 2019 to 2023, the Dokdo Foundation held an annual "Dokdo Goods Biz Fair" exhibiting products from local design firms relating to Dokdo and Ulleung-do. The 2023 Dokdo Biz Fair, held concurrently with the "Gyeongsangbuk-do Village Enterprise" craft fair in Pohang, showcased "about 60 products from 25 companies" such as food products, electronics, keyrings, stationery, clothing, and cosmetics. The fair also featured a Dokdo virtual reality exhibit and a Dokdo-themed instant photo printing machine. The machine appears to be an effort to capitalize on the broadly proliferated trend of instant photo studios, which are popular among the MZ generation in South Korea (Da-som Kim 2023). Other Biz Fairs adapted metaverse game technology and virtual reality exhibits. According to the event organizers, the Biz Fairs served the dual purpose of promoting design and technological innovation, and "continuously increasing the brand value of Dokdo". The fairs show a strong desire for the Foundation to promote a wide range of products and companies which adopt Dokdo as a central element of their brand identity.

Dokdo non-profit organizations explicitly engage in the project of nation-branding. The promotion of Dokdo goods by the Dokdo Love Movement Headquarters and the Dokdo Foundation embody Aronczyk's analysis of state cultural policies. Aronczyk argues that the core of contemporary cultural production policies is the economic imperative to generate capital (2008, 45). The project of Dokdo nation branding increases Dokdo's "brand value" by engaging a wide variety of commercial firms and generating business opportunities. This judgment of the value of arts and culture in the formation of national identity closely mirrors the profit-driven evaluative frameworks employed by corporate technocrats and advertising executives who helm these non-profit organizations.

These non-profit organizations operate as corporate actors outside of the direct oversight of provincial and regional governments and employ state funding to initiate promotional campaigns centering Dokdo. These campaigns are often intertwined, both in goal and expression, with tourism initiatives and cultural policies generated by the provincial government. Branding and advertising professionals in these organizations become the facilitators of cultural policy, enabling them to operate outside of the mechanisms of accountability and political constraints present in the public sector.

Commissions

Commission is used prominently by non-profit organizations and regional governments for the purpose of generating commercial activity and supporting local industries. The Dokdo Foundation holds an annual "Dokdo Souvenir Design Contest" in conjunction with the Daegu-Gyeongbuk Craft Association and the Ulleung county government. The submission guidelines, available on the provincial government's website and the Dokdo Foundation homepage, call for "folk and craft products, industrial products", and "processed and functional foods" using "various materials from Dokdo (Ulleungdo), such as the beautiful natural scenery and historical facts of Dokdo (Ulleungdo)". Other evaluative criteria include eco-friendly products, IT-related cultural products, and souvenirs that are "easy to produce, sell, and export to domestic and foreign customers" (Designdb, n.d.). The contest awards cash prizes, recognition from the provincial governor, and the added privilege of participation in the Dokdo Biz Fair to winners.

Unfortunately, the list of contest winners is not available online, so it is necessary to make inferences about the quality of winning products based on the evaluative criteria. The judging committee was assembled from personnel with extensive experience in Dokdo history, sales and design industry professionals, and foreigners. Commercial firms, individuals, youth, and even foreigners are all invited to apply, indicating a larger focus on sourcing skilled designers. The prize money is well suited to be used as seed capital for designers to license and manufacture souvenirs. The contest incentivizes eco-friendly and innovative applications of technology, mirroring broader trends present in the world of Dokdo objects and memorial sites. The evaluative criteria presented and assemblage of judges in the contest indicate a focus on producing highly marketable, low cost, mass-producible souvenirs targeting both domestic and foreign tourists. The creative output of designers and artists are key drivers of profit in the tourism industry.

Analysis

Objects of Remembrance

Dokdo paraphernalia may originate from government funded activities, or private business attempts to capitalize on the popularity of the Dokdo issue in the Korean public (Palmer and Whitefleet-Smith 2016). I propose a distinction between two prominent categories of Dokdo objects of remembrance: tie-ins and souvenirs. Tie-ins advertise an association with Dokdo for branding purposes, but lack a demonstrable material connection to Dokdo outside of aesthetics. This includes a large volume of mass-produced, low-cost goods seen on online retailers like AliExpress, SSG.com, and Naver Shopping. Many tie-ins are interchangeable template items like t-shirts, mugs, and sweaters with screen-printed graphics.

The second category, souvenirs, includes goods that exhibit a greater degree of intentional design, and/or are materially connected to Dokdo through the tourism industry. They vary in cost, distribution (sold online, nationwide, or in physical storefronts), and exhibit a diversity of representations influenced by consumer preferences and designer creativity alike. I identify discursive elements and representations of Dokdo common to a wide range of both tie-in and souvenir goods that connect these objects of remembrance to broader themes of territorial sovereignty, ecological activism, Dokdo as a national symbol, and an eye for both domestic and foreign audiences. The variety of messages presented through objects of remembrance constitute a world of objects that are constitutive of consumers' everyday relationship to Dokdo. As goods for sale on the commercial market, these objects respond to consumer trends and are influenced by both the creative vision of their designers and the desires of their commissioners.

Though tie-ins lack a direct connection to Dokdo or the local tourism industry in Gyeongsangbuk-do, they are branded in such a way as to connect them to Dokdo through association. Food items like the 40240 Dokdo soju, produced by the KR Corporation (licensed to do business in Gangwon-do), associate Dokdo with purity. "Minerals extracted from 1500 meters under the sea of Ulleung-do" (a process which is not explained on their website or packaging) are a natural byproduct of the virginal seas surrounding Dokdo (Dokdo Soju, n.d.). Dokdo-branded seafood, such as the widely marketed Dokdo shrimp, enjoy an association with the pure, untainted waters surrounding the uninhabited islands, which are protected from Japanese fishing vessels by the Korean coast guard. The image of purity and untaintedness vis-à-vis the referent, Japan, positions Korean Dokdo as a natural resource to be protected from the toxifying influence of Japanese fishermen and territorial claims. As a symbol of the Korean nation, Dokdo remains pure and untouched, just as Japan's efforts to dilute the Korean national identity during the colonial period were unsuccessful.

Fig. 2: A bottle of Dokdo 40240 soju

Korean skincare company Round Lab markets a line of Dokdo-branded cosmetics, such as the 1025 Dokdo toner. Round Lab's Dokdo toner is one of their most popular products, and it is available for sale in Oliveyoung cosmetic stores nationwide as well as exported for sale internationally. The number 1025 references the yearly Dokdo Day national holiday in South Korea, which commemorates the day on which Emperor Gojong declared Dokdo a territory of the Korean Empire (Lee Kyoung Mi and Hahm Hee-eun 2018). On the product page, Round Lab claims to use mineralized water extracted from Ulleung-do's deep sea waters “where sunlight does not reach, and is clean and pure” (Round Lab, n.d.-b). The packaging features a simplified graphic of the islands of Dokdo in profile and a Gangchi sea lion in the water on a pale background. The minimalist packaging evokes simplicity and placidity, employing a limited palette of soft blues and greys. Taken together, the packaging and Round Lab's marketing conjure the image of purity via association with Dokdo. Its brand identity conjures associations with purity and nature, universal characteristics that respond to the trend of “clean beauty” dominating the global cosmetics market. According to Elizabeth Paton of the New York Times, clean beauty products occupy a dominant market share in the United States, relying on branding emphasizing naturally sourced ingredients, sustainability, and non-toxicity (2023). Korean marketing consultants and large corporations like Oliveyoung and LG Household and Healthcare have identified “clean beauty” as a global trend, focusing on clean beauty cosmetics targeting the 20–30-year-old consumer demographic (Choi Sang-a 2023). In addition to global marketability as a clean beauty product, the product line's multiple references to Dokdo, especially the Gangchi sea lion and the Dokdo Day holiday, are uniquely legible to South Korean consumers. Its association with Dokdo carries special significance to domestic consumers, promoting brand affinity connected to consumer identification with Dokdo. The product line also has a direct link to Dokdo non-profit commissioning, as an award-winning submission to the first Dokdo Biz Fair in 2019 (Round Lab, n.d.-c). Since then, Round Lab's Dokdo cosmetics have become one of Round Lab's best-selling product lines online and at physical distributors internationally.

Another example of a tie-in product are Dokdo-themed erasers manufactured by morning glory [sic], a stationery firm (MGStore, n.d.). The eraser's sleeve features a small graphic of the Dokdo islands in profile. The erasers are sold at stationery shops nationwide. I purchased one for my own collection at a small office supplies store in Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, far from the tourism market in Ulleung-do. Notably, the erasers received the mark of certification offered by the Dokdo Love Movement Headquarters [fig. 1]. The product page advertises that the erasers are a “Dokdo Love Movement Headquarters-approved product”, and that 50% of profits from the sale of erasers would be donated to a “Dokdo support fund” for organizations dedicated to protecting Dokdo (MGStore, n.d.). The donated proceeds directly tie a product which employs a Dokdo brand image to non-profit organizations engaging in Dokdo activism. Employing a charitable product marketing strategy, morning glory is able to retain 50% of their sales revenue on erasers while gaining a unique distinction from other tie-in goods that attracts consumers interested in supporting Dokdo groups. One Korean netizen commented that they would rather buy a domestic product than a Japanese one, and that the morning glory eraser made them feel like they were “helping Dokdo” (Joha, n.d.).

Souvenir objects exhibit a more local focus than tie-ins, and branding intended to connect them to regional tourism to Dokdo and Ulleung-do. Ulleung-do is a small island located about 120km off of the South Korean coastline in the Sea of Japan. To visit Dokdo, one must take a 3.5 hour ferry ride from Pohang, and then another two-hour ferry departing from Ulleung-do to the Dokdo islets themselves (Schutz 2015). Its role as the sole departure point for vessels bound to Dokdo is a major selling point of its local tourism economy. The Ulleung-do county government cooperates with the Gyeongsangbuk-do provincial government (its senior administrative unit) to promote tourism to Dokdo and the island itself, creating connections between Dokdo, Ulleung-do, Pohang, and the provincial seat, Andong. The tourism economy creates linkages of capital and people between the islands and the mainland province, enhancing remote territories' integration into the economy and legal jurisdiction.

One prominent online retailer of Dokdo souvenirs is the Dokdo Stationery Store, which has a physical location in Ulleung-do (Dokdo Stationery Store, n.d.-b). The store was opened in 2015 by Kim Min-jeong, an Ulleung-do resident. In an interview, Kim recalls that she received initial funding from the Social Enterprise Promotion Agency under Korea's Ministry of Employment and Labor. She argues that patriotic, flag-waving rallies on Dokdo and Ulleung-do for Independence Day and Liberation Day are "too old-fashioned". Instead, she describes a desire to create "sensory souvenirs" for young people, claiming that "the way to truly love Dokdo as a travel destination is to be with it in everyday life" (M. Kim 2023). Kim's entrepreneurial vision to create Dokdo souvenirs was the first business of its kind in Ulleung-do. Her words evoke the observations of scholars like Clericuzio and Zemanek, who emphasize the importance of souvenirs in constructing the nation in one's everyday life.

I select souvenirs from Dokdo Stationery Store's online storefront as representative examples of the range of Dokdo souvenirs on offer in Ulleung-do. The store is the largest and most well-known souvenir distributor on the island, and the variety of products on offer represent common types and representations seen throughout the body of souvenirs that I have collected online. No souvenir on the online storefront costs more than 40,000 won (USD $27.95), and all products are available for nationwide shipping. The items include T-shirts and other clothing items, magnets, stationery, accessories, and other small, mass-producible items. Low-cost, mass-producible have a wide appeal among tourists looking for a memento of their trip to Ulleung-do or Dokdo, as recognized by the marketing professionals at the Dokdo Foundation (Dokdo Foundation, n.d.). However, the Dokdo Stationery Store collaborates with a variety of domestic artists and designers to make themed products. Kim herself also designs and produces a variety of items, marked on the storefront as "Self-made".

Fig. 3: a Dokdo pin badge, available for 7,000 KRW on the Dokdo Stationery Store's online storefront

The first item I select, a small pin badge (fig. 3), is representative of a wide variety of small keepsakes such as pins, charms, keychains, and fridge magnets. The badge features a small graphic of the Dokdo islands in profile, and a small Taegeukgi (Korea's national flag) planted on one of the islands. The badge also features the word "Dokdo" written in English. Many other souvenirs also feature the South Korean national flag. The ubiquitous presence of the Taegeukgi connects Dokdo to Korean national identity. Here, the flag is planted directly on the physical islands of Dokdo, creating a visual representation of the territorial claim being staked. The simplified graphic of Dokdo also omits the conspicuous military installation and observation station, visible in photographs of the island. Reducing Dokdo to a recognizable silhouette removes this complication to Dokdo's natural scenery and creates a graphical element similar to a logo in a brand identity. Further, the pin badge's English text also makes the pin legible to foreigners, hinting at a broader appeal to both domestic and foreign audiences.[2]

[2] It should be noted that English literacy rates are high in South Korea, and the average young person would be able to recognize and understand the English text. This is not to imply that the text is solely intended for foreigners; rather, it serves a dual purpose appealing both to a younger generation of domestic tourists and foreign tourists.

Fig. 4: “My name is Dokdo” eco bag and postcards, created by Dana Fashion Group. [Photo credit: Scarlet Yi https://blog.naver.com/j2yjh/221051228903]

Clothing items are another type of Dokdo souvenir good commonly seen online. The Dokdo Stationery Store carries a variety of clothing items, including varsity sweatshirts, socks, and an “I Love Dokdo” shirt that resembles the classic I Love NY logo. A different design firm, Dana Fashion Group, created a Dokdo-themed eco-tote bag (fig. 4). The graphic features a stylized depiction of the islands in profile, with a Taegeukgi planted on the larger island. A flock of seagulls circle the island. A cross-section of the ocean surrounding the islands shows coral and other marine life, including a Gangchi sea lion. Many Dokdo souvenirs feature flora and fauna native to the surrounding waters and islands. Just as Dokdo shrimp are strongly associated with purity and freshness, Ulleung-do is widely known in Korea for its squid (Hong). In plush keychains from the Dokdo Stationery Store, the Dokdo shrimp, Ulleung-do squid, and the Gangchi sea lion are transformed into cutesy souvenirs and mascot characters representing the islands (Dokdo Stationery Store, n.d.-a).

The Gangchi sea lion is notably different from other kinds of animal life associated with Dokdo. The extinction of the Gangchi sea lion is an issue enmeshed in ecological activism, Dokdo nationalism, and anti-Japanese sentiment. The Gangchi sea lion was indigenous to the Sea of Japan, especially the coastal waters of Japan and the Korean Peninsula.[3] Gangchi sea lions were known to inhabit the islands of Dokdo until they were declared extinct in the 1970s. Though the Gangchi sea lion inhabited a large habitat area including Japanese islands, they have become strongly associated with Dokdo. According to Gyeongsangbuk-do's Dokdo Cyber School, "Sea lions disappeared from Dokdo due to the excessive greed of Japanese fishermen." (Gyeongsangbuk-do Office of Education, n.d.) The province's official Dokdo educational resources cast the Gangchi sea lion as a victim of Korea's colonization by Japan, and invoke its memory as a reminder of the need for ecological conservation of the marine habitats on Dokdo. The Japanese fisherman is portrayed as greedy, opportunistic, and hostile to innocent life, mirroring discourses of the Japanese colonial period in Korea. Ecological conservation legitimizes the R.O.K. Coast Guard's direct stewardship of the islands and recasts the territorial dispute through the terms of protecting wildlife from overfishing and ecological destruction.

The text on the bag reads "My name is Dokdo" in Korean. The bags and postcards were released in 2017 as part of a coordinated campaign among Korean NGOs to achieve international recognition of Dokdo. The campaign targeted Google and the US Geological Survey's decision to rename Dokdo to the Liancourt Rocks on its maps (Cheong-mo 2017). Dana Fashion Group released the eco bags and postcards as part of the campaign, advertising that a portion of the proceeds from each sale would be donated to Dokdo activist groups. According to Dana, the included Dokdo-themed stamps were designed in cooperation with South Korea's national postal service. One netizen describes a desire for the bag and postcard to initiate conversations with foreign friends (Molly, n.d.). Both designers and consumers are conscious of the need to represent Dokdo to international audiences. Firms like Dana Fashion Group create ways for consumers all over the country to participate in Dokdo activism as brand ambassadors both for their designs and for Dokdo. Corporate brand identities (the Nike swoosh, the Adidas three stripes) are replaced with Dokdo's brand identity.

[3] In English, this species is referred to as the Japanese sea lion. I instead use the species name as it is written in Korean for the purposes of this paper.

Fig. 2: The Dokdo Honorary Resident Certificate, front and back details

An exceptional example of a souvenir object is the Dokdo Honorary Resident Certificate (독도명예주민증) offered by the Dokdo Business Center in Pohang (Ulleung City Government, n.d.). The certificate, meant to resemble the Republic of Korea's national identity cards, is distributed by the Gyeongsangbuk-do provincial government. The card is a souvenir exclusive to those who have visited Dokdo in person. One can receive a card free of charge by presenting a boarding pass for a vessel bound for Dokdo. Without a profit incentive, the certificate is a unique example of a product fully subsidized by the provincial government. The document carries no legal standing, but its visual similarity to the official document provides insight into its purpose. As recognizable facsimiles of existing administrative documents, the cards create an imagined reality of a territorially integrated, settled Dokdo. Although there are no real permanent residents on Dokdo, the documents integrate the islands into the administrative framework of providing resident certificates and legitimize the provincial government's jurisdiction. The islands become legally inhabitable by Korean citizens, if not practically habitable, further integrating remote territories into the national whole.

Dokdo goods are the product of work done by both marketing professionals and independent designers. Recognizable design elements, drawn from the intangible repository of collective cultural knowledge, create common representations throughout the media and create a coherent brand identity for Dokdo. As objects of remembrance, these items affix Dokdo as a *lieu de memoire* in cultural memory and construct Dokdo as a symbol of the Korean nation. Tie-ins conjure Korean indigeneity and imagined connections to the islands of Dokdo. Key branding characteristics associated with Dokdo- cleanliness, purity, natural beauty- are transferred to the Korean national identity. Souvenir goods target consumer desires to authenticate personal tourism experiences and serve as symbols of the Korean nation. Dokdo goods engage in the competitive re-narrativization of nationalism seen in nation branding projects, as the Dokdo issue is repackaged through the medium of trendy consumer goods to suit a younger generation and broader globalized audiences. Both designers and consumers voice a desire to engage foreigners on the topic of Dokdo as activists and brand ambassadors. As products for sale, Dokdo goods utilize professional marketing tactics that identify consumer trends and create low-cost, mass-producible goods embedded in networks of consumption at the scales of the local tourism economy and the global online market.

Monuments and Sites of Memory

Palmer and Whitefleet-Smith analyze the content of Dokdo monuments and exhibits, observing that the South Korean government funds public campaigns to promote Dokdo (Palmer and Whitefleet-Smith 2016). Examining the physical space and content of Dokdo monuments around the country, I find a proliferation of recent installations that utilize consistent design themes, discursive visual and textual elements, and integrate novel technologies to create *lieux de memoire* of Dokdo. Embracing Jacques Nora's defining analysis of the purpose of a monument, these sites integrate novel approaches to create worlds of remembered and imagined experiences in the minds of visitors.

Dokdo dioramas and models are a common feature of Dokdo monuments. Scale models project physical reality into the monument space and are often accompanied by educational information. The Dokdo dioramas in Jamsil, City Hall, Gwanghwamun, Itaewon, Gimpo Airport, and formerly Anguk

Station in the Seoul Metro are located in busy transfer stations, so they are viewed in passing by hundreds of thousands of people per day (Joo 2024). The diorama inside the War Memorial of Korea includes the exact latitude and longitude of Dokdo's islands, as well as its mailing address within the national administrative division system: Gyeongsangbuk-do, Ulleung-gun, Ulleung-eup, Dokdo-ri 1-96 (Jang Seon-hwa 2024). Informational placards accompanying the dioramas echo the official territorial claims presented by the national government, and provide additional geospatial and administrative context to formalize and legitimize Korea's claim to Dokdo.

Space and placement contextualize the purpose of Dokdo-themed installations. In the context of the War Memorial of Korea, this projection of the Korean Coast Guard's military infrastructure onto the islands fits the broader narratives highlighting the duties of the Republic of Korea's military throughout the War Memorial's installation. The diorama constructs an unfiltered physical representation of Dokdo, including the military installation and naval observatory on Dokdo, unlike other selective representations which exclude the man-made structures. Another large Dokdo diorama is installed at Sangmyung University in Seoul, in a public plaza near the university's student center. Installed in 2013, the diorama also features the military installation alongside scale models of black-tailed gull habitats and Dokdo's shoreline ecology. The Chungcheong Daily's news article on the exhibition reflects on the exhibit's purpose, "allowing people to view Dokdo, which is not easily accessible from land, and reflect on the spirit of 'love for Dokdo, love for the country'" (Jang Seon-hwa 2024). This understanding reflects Avner Ben-Amos's explanation of the effect of monument sites on cultural memory: Students interacting with the diorama in a high-traffic area, whether engaging with the content of the exhibit or simply passing by, participate in a mundane process of everyday remembrance of Dokdo (Ben-Amos 1993). The exhibit's detailed reproduction of Dokdo allows spectators to visualize the remote concept of Dokdo as a physical space within their imagination of the nation.

The original Dokdo dioramas in Seoul were installed in 2009. Since that time, new technologies have proliferated that have been utilized widely throughout a range of monument sites. The Dokdo Museum in Ulleung-do is a popular tourist destination for those visiting the island. The museum incorporates common narratives reinforcing South Korean territorial sovereignty over Dokdo, including materials and archival documents on display about historical territorial claims and the activities of the Ulleung-do Coast Guard which administers Dokdo. In addition to the curation of informational placards and artifacts, the museum engages a technological approach to immersing visitors in Dokdo. Displays in the museum's permanent "Dokdo information search space" connect to live Internet feeds of cameras installed on Dokdo (Dokdo Museum, n.d.-b). The exhibition also incorporates immersive 360 VR video spaces of Dokdo and aerial footage, providing views that are "difficult for the general public to access" (Dokdo Museum, n.d.-a).

Fig. 6: Layout of the Dalseo Metaverse Experience Center, published on their website

A novel frontier currently being explored by Dokdo monument designers is the metaverse. Online and digital museum spaces are substituting traditional museum layouts in places like the Dalseo Metaverse Experience Center in Daegu (fig. 6). The Center features several virtual Dokdo experiences: an interactive zone on Dokdo ecology featuring touch projection technology; a VR Dokdo experience zone, promising that one can feel "as if you are actually walking, swimming, and flying on Dokdo"; a Dokdo metaverse game in which one completes educational missions and quizzes; an avatar creation zone; and immersive media environments showcasing Dokdo's marine life and featuring visitors' created metaverse avatars (Dalseo Arts Foundation, n.d.). In 2017, Saereom High School in Sejong City received funding from the Ministry of Education and Northeast Asian History Foundation to construct a permanent Dokdo exhibition hall on their campus as part of a broader initiative to create Dokdo Exhibition Halls around the country. According to Sejong City's education office, the exhibit explains South Korean sovereignty over Dokdo combining evidence from history, geography, and international law (J. Han 2017). The exhibition combines a large scale model of Dokdo featuring ecological information, displays of maps and historical materials, and immersive video and virtual reality experiences. The exhibition also integrates the NAHF's online archive of Dokdo historical materials with an interactive visitor kiosk. The NAHF's Dokdo Exhibition Halls combine traditional exhibit modalities with advanced technology applications to create an immersive Dokdo experience.

These technologies transcend the physicality of the monument space to create the sensory experience of visiting Dokdo, allowing visitors to imagine themselves in a location far removed from the site. They also provide funded spaces for designers to explore innovative technological applications at the frontiers of exhibit design. The Dalseo Metaverse Experience Center is integrated into the Dalseo Arts Center, which receives funding and support from the national government.

Fig. 5: “Gangchi. Dokdo.” special exhibition at the National Maritime Museum in Busan.

Many Dokdo monuments adopt an environmental focus. One notable example is a special exhibition at the National Maritime Museum in Busan on Gangchi sea lions held from December 18, 2019, to March 15, 2020. According to news reports, the exhibit investigates how the Dokdo sea lion became distinct, with an eye on Japan’s “anti-cultural” and “anti-ecological” actions and “indiscriminate hunting” by Japanese fishermen (Y. Kim, n.d.). The exhibit draws parallels between the Dodo bird (perhaps one of the most famous examples of extinction by human over-hunting) and the Gangchi sea lion. The composition of sepia-toned sea lion cutouts at the exhibit’s entrance invokes the feeling of headstones in a graveyard, living objects rendered inanimate. Photos of exhibit placards show a mix of scientific information about the sea lions, and historical and archival evidence illustrate the narrative of Japanese overfishing.

The Gangchi sea lion special exhibition illustrates how the story of the sea lion has become enmeshed in the parallel narratives of ecological conservation, Dokdo nationalism, and anti-Japanese sentiment. The exhibit presents an accusatory perspective towards Japan but couches its hostility in an ecological imperative to protect Dokdo’s indigenous wildlife.

Dokdo’s relative isolation 286 km from the Korean mainland makes it an exceptionally difficult place to visit. Travel guides describe a rough over-water journey to visit Dokdo, and a brief 45-minute time limit for visitors to the island’s visitor platform/military installation. Conscious of the challenge to integrate a far-flung territory into the contiguous land of the Korean peninsula, monument sites serve to create the ability to visit Dokdo without being there. Monument space designers employ *ars memoriae* to conjure imagined connections to Dokdo, connecting visitors to the natural terrain and ecology of Dokdo remotely. Monuments adopt new immersive technologies like virtual reality and the metaverse that surpass the communicative potential of traditional exhibit design, signaling a new frontier in the design and production of monument sites. The target audience for these technologized installations reflects a focus on engaging domestic visitors from the “2030 generation”. They present the argument for South Korean territorial sovereignty over the islands, integrating historical evidence and commemorating the activities of South Korea’s Coast Guard and citizen activists. Dokdo museums engage the tourist gaze, packaging Dokdo as a travel destination, inspiring curiosity about Dokdo’s natural features, and provokes a desire to visit Dokdo, and by extension Ulleung-do.

Conclusion

This research examines how the Dokdo issue is created, reproduced, and consumed in everyday life in South Korea. My analysis suggests that state power is directed through cultural policies of nation branding financed by the Gyeongsangbuk-do provincial government and organized by a professional class of marketing professionals to influence dominant narratives of cultural remembrance of Dokdo. I find that through the world of objects and sites of memory created by a variety of independent actors, several connected discursive representations of Dokdo are dominant and cohesive in a way that suggests a concerted project to create a “brand identity” for Dokdo. Borrowing the Dokdo Foundation’s own terminology for its branding campaign, I term this vision the “K-Dokdo” approach (Dokdo Foundation, n.d.). K-Dokdo discourses create linkages between the elements of ecological conservationism, Korean nationalism, and local tourism initiatives in Ulleung-do and Dokdo. Knitted together, these threads shroud anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea’s territorial dispute with Japan. The designers and marketing professionals leading the organized K-Dokdo effort identify a reluctance among younger generations to engage with nationalism in the “old-fashioned”, flag-waving, rally-attending way. Their souvenirs provide a narrative of Dokdo and the South Korean nation that competes with international narratives and adapts market trends with an eye towards Generation MZ.

However, one could reason that K-Dokdo is an elite, government-led initiative, based on the Dokdo Foundation’s strong linkages with provincial and municipal governments. There is reason to believe that government incentives for Dokdo brands are a primary motivator for the prevalence of designers and firms engaging the Dokdo issue. However, I see consumer preference, personal identities, and artistic vision as equally strong motivators for the range of individuals who provided their reasoning for buying or selling Dokdo products. My conclusions could be strengthened by interviewing the bureaucrats, artists, and entrepreneurs to learn more about their personal relationships with the K-Dokdo project.

My analysis of Dokdo objects includes a wide variety of tie-ins and souvenirs such as clothing, cosmetics, food, stationery, and more. These products are embedded in a network of financial relationships that spans the instruments of state power, non-profit organizations, marketing professionals and business-driven evaluative frameworks, market trends, and consumer interests. Some products adopt a Dokdo brand identity, transferring positive qualities associated with Dokdo onto the product. Souvenirs recall tourist experiences, engaging the cultural memory of the nation to satisfy tourist desires. This synergizes well with the project of promoting Dokdo indigeneity, especially in the tourism economies of Ulleung-do and Gyeongsangbuk-do.

Dokdo monuments capture common themes with the goal of promoting awareness of Dokdo and engaging visitors in transformative experiences that create sites of memory and future desires to visit Dokdo. Sites of memory engage a broad audience in the everyday practices of tourism and inhabited physical spaces, assimilating the remote territory of Dokdo into the imagined nation. Today, immersive virtual technologies are used to transcend the limitations of *ars memoriae* and transport spectators into the physical world of Dokdo.

I also observe more dynamic engagement with the Dokdo issue at the subnational level than the limited activism that Korea's national government engages with through the Northeast Asia History Foundation. That being the case, the political winds are changing in South Korea. Lee Jae-myung's Democratic Party has signaled a commitment to stronger Dokdo activism in light of Yoon's sidelining of the dispute in pursuit of normalization with Japan. In this politically contested space, I see the K-Dokdo approach being developed at the subnational level as a future avenue for opposition politicians looking to take a stronger stance on Dokdo.

South Korea's approach to engaging the mass symbolic politics of modern nationalism contains some broader lessons for political strategy. The policy position of South Korea vis-à-vis Japan is strengthened by its popularity and broad public engagement, while Japan is comparatively weakened by internal disagreements on the merit of *kokutai* politics and disconnect between elite conservative politicians and the public (J. Y. Kim 2014b, 38). This research suggests that an approach driven by innovation and intergenerational engagement serves to benefit both grassroots and elite actors seeking to promote their own expressions of national identity in a liberal, multicultural global community. This project may preview the creative work involved in constructing functional national communities and preserving the particularity of post-classical nations in the globalized 21st century.

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WEARING THE CROWNS ABROAD: HOW FOREIGN-BORN MONARCHS ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN LEGITIMACY

Zachary Veloz

Abstract

Legitimacy and governance are essential to any form of government, as they justify authority and its effectiveness among the population. This paper explores the concepts of legitimacy and governance through a historical lens, as it attempts to answer the question: Why have some foreign-born monarchs been successful in establishing authority, while others have been unsuccessful in gaining/maintaining it? Examining how previous eras of rulers established legitimacy provides a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts that are applicable to modern governments. Key variables such as historical context, foreign support, political control, and public support are evaluated to contribute an alternative perspective in the overall discourse of legitimacy/governance. The research will be conducted as a small-n case study using Philip V of Spain, Jean Baptiste Bernadotte of Sweden, and Maximilian I of Mexico. The study will use qualitative data; however, it will be quantified numerically (0 or 1), based on the amount of a given variable. Through interpreting primary sources such as literature, official documents, newspapers, etc., the higher amount of each variable a monarch possesses correlates with their success in establishing and maintaining legitimacy. The paper determines it is important for a ruler to recognize cultural, political, and societal differences before imposing their philosophies.

Keywords: legitimacy, governance, political authority, foreign monarchs

Introduction

Monarchies, a form of government centered on a sovereign individual, typically in the form of a king or queen, have existed throughout history with the fundamental goal of maintaining power. While monarchs are often native to the area in which they rule, history offers numerous cases of monarchs originating outside the territory they command. These foreign-born monarchs are unique because they cultivate legitimacy by developing new structures and identities, despite having no prior ties to the established order and culture. With varying degrees of success in how foreign-born monarchs established power, the paper will attempt to answer the following question: Why have some foreign-born monarchs been successful in establishing authority, while others are unsuccessful in gaining/maintaining authority?

It is necessary to research the overall concepts of legitimacy and governance. More specifically, identifying the theoretical frameworks that leaders used to gain the consent of subjects is crucial. Gaining insight into these two subjects will provide a foundation for analyzing why one has been entrusted with authority and how their governance techniques intend to help retain power. In addition, it is also important to recognize the time period in which monarchies garnered popularity to identify period-specific patterns and normalities that foreign-born monarchs may have wanted to implement.

Legitimacy is an important aspect in state building as it provides a government reassurance that its subjects will follow the rule of law without the threat of potential uprising and anarchy. The definition of legitimacy that will be used throughout this paper is "a belief of an individual or group of people that a ruler or institution shall be obeyed based on alignment with values." This definition integrates interpretations of scholars such as Peter Stillman and Ian Hurd. It was adopted because it highlights the nature of legitimacy as a "normative belief by an actor" which centers on the relationship between the ruler and the ruled (Hurd 1999). Failure to acquire legitimacy results in subjects revolting to establish another leader/form of government that instills more confidence in the people. Along with legitimacy, governance is also an important part of state-building to provide a framework for structural implementation. Governance can help build legitimacy and establish stability within a state, while poor governance undermines authority and causes instability. Governance and legitimacy work in harmony in order to ensure a government is able to express its power effectively.

Existing literature on legitimacy/government focuses on the idea of public belief based on a nation's complex system of issues, ranging from economics, defense, and security. Scholars examine an array of forms of government, including democracies, socialists, and authoritarian rule, highlighting factors such as tradition, legality, international recognition, and religion. However, there has been very little research done specifically on the means foreign-born monarchs take to establish legitimacy and governance. From investigating the success or failure of monarchs, my research will consist of various factors, including the level of foreign support, control over the nobility, public perception, and historical background. This paper will analyze specific cases of foreign-born monarchs, including Philip V of Spain, Carl XIV Johan of Sweden, and Maximilian of Mexico, that will serve as case studies. Exploring these cases will result in a more nuanced perspective on what shaped a foreign monarch's success, while setting a consistent set of values to isolate key variables.

Ultimately, this research attempts to fill in a gap within existing literature and advance the discourse surrounding legitimacy, expanding on new pathways rooted in political alignment and adaptation rather than tradition or culture. It reveals the principles of how foreign-born leaders manage to hold power and its broader applicability. By analyzing foreign backing, historical support, and political control, the study will examine why these monarchs fail or succeed and discover a positive correlation between these factors and legitimacy. Overall, my paper provides an in-depth historical reflection of the monarchical period, while having overarching theories of legitimacy and governance that are prevalent in the current geopolitical climate.

Literature Review

The concepts of "legitimacy" and "governance" have been frequently theorized and reworked in literature in attempts to create a definition that withstands time. A majority of legitimacy theories center upon the idea of belief and trust that "obeying the state is right and proper (McMann 2016)." However, the question regarding how legitimacy is established has eluded a consensus amongst scholars.

Legitimacy is divided between input legitimacy and output legitimacy. Input legitimacy focuses on citizen participation and governments' responsiveness, while output legitimacy prioritizes the effectiveness of government policies and their outcomes (Schmidt and Wood 2019). Peter Stillman maintains that governmental legitimacy is established if governmental outputs are compatible with the values of society it governs (Stillman 1974). Without government alignment of societal norms, any output of said government is deemed inefficient. Stillman's idea to prioritize the execution of government over intent is limited when considering that, oftentimes, the government can also change and shift social norms that people abide by (Madison 2001). Stillman's definition hinges upon the unrealistic idea that societal norms will remain somewhat constant.

Scholars such as Kelly McMann offer a counter opinion to Stillman's rigidity, determining that success in preserving legitimacy is heavily reliant on the capacity of a state's material resources. McMann theorizes that the government can "propagate identical or competing criteria" to persuade social actors to adopt governmental ideals (McMann 2016). Dominant forces in society, like governmental leaders, have significant influence on legitimacy because they have the capacity and control mechanisms to define norms as successful. Similar to Stillman's interpretation, McMann also acknowledges that individuals can decide whether to adopt these based on their fit within society. Where McMann differs is when stating that individuals embrace ideas that result in the most success, regardless of current societal goals. In McMann's study, analyzing legitimacy in Central Asia, the people of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan maintained legitimacy towards their government despite heavily shifting values because these governments created ideas and narratives that previous Soviet ideals needed to change (McMann 2016).

Political scientist Charles Tilly offers a contrasting perspective on how legitimacy is achieved, autonomously from either Stillman or McMann. In his book "Capital and Coercion," Tilly criticizes theoretical forms of legitimacy and instead advocates that legitimacy is derived from the ability to provide security and care to the people for statecraft since the fundamental purpose of government is to protect its subjects (Tilly 1992). Legitimacy shouldn't be determined by social alignment; rather, the effectiveness of the regime is viewed more critically. As long as the state adequately performs its expected functions of maintaining order through whatever means deemed fit, it shall remain legitimate. Tilly views legitimacy less as a theoretical battle between society and the government, opting to measure it with a more tangible criterion that extends into the international stage.

While Stillman, McMann, and Tilly's interpretations all have their places within discourse, they are all limited within their scope. Existing research emphasizes institutional performance and government effectiveness while assuming a shared historical, social, and political context. This leaves little room to explore when a shared identity is disrupted, like with foreign-born monarchs, and fails to consider that each situation has a unique context in how their subjects viewed legitimacy. The current discourse ignores many transnational and cultural elements that this paper will attempt to fill.

Another aspect of legitimacy is international legitimacy, utilized strategically to consolidate control globally and domestically. States and their respective governments generally uphold the international norm of sovereignty for two reasons. First, it is not in the best interest of the domestic government to deviate from the international order and therefore seek self-restraint to maintain legitimacy. Second, the policy of sovereignty has been widely internationalized and legitimized amongst nations (Hurd 1999). However, when one or both of these factors are broken, legitimacy is threatened, and the likelihood of international conflict increases. Former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, theorizes “domestic structure crucially affects the way the actions of other states are interpreted (Kissinger 1966).” In other words, a state's internal political structure impacts the way it views external actors, rendering international behavior inseparable from domestic concerns. This is why political leaders may view conflict as a necessary means to neutralize potential threats and reaffirm their own ideological legitimacy. Scholar Waheed Khan agrees with Kissinger’s conclusion, citing two circumstances in which domestic legitimacy is highlighted internationally: 1) when states get involved to enhance domestic legitimacy through success, and 2) when competing domestic challenges to legitimacy incite international conflict (Khan 2009). Khan proposes that regime legitimacy is more important than state legitimacy since conflicts enable leaders to harness, utilize, and exploit legitimacy by developing governmental unity in response to perceived threats that facilitates a larger discussion on governance. Khan’s interpretation doesn’t account for context, such as the scale of international conflicts and the actors involved, which significantly determine the extent to which legitimacy is recognized abroad.

Governance has also been subjected to intense discussion within the fields of international relations, political science, public administration, etc. Governance is an all-encompassing term referring to the process used for overseeing direct control. Laura Jensen conceptualizes governance in the form of an amoeba. Inside the amoeba are four main organisms: government, society, laws/institutions, and other private organizations that evolve (Jensen 2008). She argues that the term governance captures the kinetic relationship of the state, accommodating a larger sense of reality as well as historical developments and transformations. Government is merely a tool to reaffirm a relationship with the state that can’t fully achieve governance without three other organisms, rather than being the definitive feature. Jensen’s framework demonstrates that government is a form of sovereignty and social organization that must be understood through empirical cases of governance rather than relying on theoretical reasoning. A notable discrepancy in Jensen’s work is how the diagram depicts each organism as isolated within the amoeba of governance; as all four organisms interact fluidly, relying on each other for balance. Therefore, it is incorrect to paint them as completely distinct from each other.

Beyond investigating the definition of governance, there is debate on how scholars should measure governance and government effectiveness. Effectiveness is a relative concept that expresses itself both domestically and internationally. Some argue it refers to the compliance with international law that protects their sovereignty (Ferreira 2008), while others would identify the aim of effectiveness as maintaining public order. In either case, there are a myriad of threats, including a lack of governmental trust and internal and external violence as “the primary cause for governments losing effectiveness” (Kreijen and Jennings 2004). States that are unable to govern themselves andmaintain the validity of international law maintain their effectiveness eventually collapse, becoming classified as failed states. The features for a state collapse, as the World Bank put it, revolve around the absence of an effective government (Boer 1997). This has been backed up by various scholars who note the collapse of states as the inability to perform legally binding actions and a disintegration of authority, with private sectors usurping any remaining power.

This approach has met constant criticism due to its archaic nature, as it overlooks more justice and human rights-based values, focusing solely on government policy. It stems from the inability to account for the shift to more justice and morality-based global values. Ferreira suggests an alternative approach that assesses a state using good governance as a standard. Effective government is a factor of good governance, along with values such as openness, participation, and human rights that are not inherent with effectiveness (Ferreira 2008). It serves as a theoretical justification, as Ferreira puts it, to intervene in situations where values aren't properly met. Ferreira's morality guidelines become particularly contested with authoritarian states, which he deems failures in his word for not supplying human rights, despite possessing complete governmental capacity and control. Although the idea of good governance has a greater range compared to the term effective government, it still leaves room for improvement. The term good is far more subjective, making it even more difficult to envision universal acceptance. Additionally, using such a subjective term as a justification is problematic, as nations can excessively intervene in a foreign country under the guidance of establishing their impression of good governance. Along with examining how governance is thought in a global perspective, it is critical to carefully analyze the role of government in society.

According to Jos Raadschelders, government "is an institutional arrangement that people develop," that prioritizes external order and safety (Raadschelders 2020). Raadschelders presents 3 key features of a government: it is man-made, seeks to safeguard a level of security for the people, and it exists in artificial societies. Since governments are solely responsible for creating laws and regulations, they exercise control over all services and social organizations, serving as the key institutional structure of society. However, authority is not inherent but contingent on strong social structures that prevent abuse of its powers and ensure accountability. The government's role in society concentrates around its political/economic power, primarily done through extraction, but the legitimacy between government and society is characterized by the prevailing political system. Proactive forms of government involve extracting resources, such as taxes, to benefit society and provide forms of security and welfare to the population as opposed to an elite group of people. Tilly extends this idea by arguing that the government resembles "protection rackets" for the people in exchange for loyalty, emphasizing the transactional nature of authority (Tilly 1992). The government is expected to meet challenges that the general population cannot enforce through its authority to initiate laws and regulations. The changing nature of government throughout history persists, forced to adapt to the environment. Fundamental institutional arrangements such as the hierarchy of legislation, legal frameworks, and participation cannot simply be produced, but have to derive from decades of historical and cultural progression.

Methodology

This paper will employ a small N case study approach utilizing three distinct examples of foreign-born monarchs. This is the preferred method over discourse analysis as it grants me the ability to explore multiple different cases to better identify potential patterns that appear, whereas discourse analysis only permits a singular case. Discourse analysis prioritizes interpretation to a greater extent, therefore making it difficult to standardize and indicate definitive proof. Although the majority of research on legitimacy has been done through a discourse analysis, there have been successful studies conducted in the past that have measured legitimacy through a neo-positive lens[1], which I will draw inspiration from.

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[1] Arif, Imran, and Nabamita Dutta. "Legitimacy of Government and Governance." *Journal of Institutional Economics* 20 (2024): e14. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137423000334.

The study will be analyzing qualitative data as opposed to quantitative data for more meaningful and accurate results. Legitimacy is inherently subjective, shaped by differing interpretations less suited for concrete numerical data and more appropriately aligning with qualitative data. With each case study occurring approximately 200-250 years ago, many forms of quantitative data suffer from the lack of established collection caused by the inexperience of bureaucracies. In contrast, using qualitative data emphasizes the historical and social contexts necessary to practically analyze each case.

Despite flaws and tradeoffs that arise using a qualitative outlook, it remains the most practical framework for this paper as it best captures the nuances and complexity of a monarchical system, particularly with foreign-born monarchs. The qualitative data used for this paper include written declarations made by the king or officials close to him, laws passed during their rule, treaties with other nations, pamphlets/newspapers, and other forms of literature. These sources provide a well-rounded overview of exploring rhetorical strategies that these rulers/government officials employed, how they appeared on an international stage, as well as how the general public perceived them, assessing how good certain rhetorical strategies were in establishing and maintaining legitimacy. All sources analyzed will be primary sources as they give a precise understanding of the social/political structure in all three cases, while avoiding miscommunications and inaccuracies that arise when relying on secondary sources.

I will analyze the qualitative data to formulate a standardized scale for each variable, assigning either a score of 0 or 1. A variable that scores zero signifies a low amount of the given variable present, while a score of 1 indicates a high amount of the variable present. Determining a variable's score is based on my own interpretation of the qualitative data. Qualitative data's heavy reliance on historical/political context makes it challenging to compare different cases, as each provides unique circumstances. It operates in a way that reflects the conditions needed for a foreign-born monarch to have sustained legitimacy. The in-depth analysis and reasoning through examining primary sources will help counter the potential oversimplification of the system.

Using alternative scoring systems, such as a low/medium/high ranking, further increases the presence of subjectivity by adding layers of interpretation. The standardized score of 0-1 makes it feasible to compare variables between case studies effectively and definitively, whereas a low/medium/high ranking is less applicable because each case may define the categories differently. With a uniform comparison, I can identify patterns more easily that contribute to my explanation of the relationship between foreign-born monarchies and legitimacy. While the standardized form helps identify patterns and relationships, it has limitations. Despite using a numerical scale to decrease interpretation, the system still relies on one's interpretation of historical accounts and sources. Evidence is often mixed that cannot be accounted for by the binary system, creating the risk of viewing interpretation as definitive.

The term foreign-born monarchs in this paper refers solely to Western-based foreign monarchs from the 1700s to the early 1800s. Restricting the scope is to maintain political and cultural consistency, as non-Western-based monarchs operate within a unique cultural, historical, and political context that is beyond the scope of this paper. It allows for the identification of patterns specific to Western-based foreign-born monarchs and is not definitely applicable elsewhere. The selected time period is also important to consider, as the early 1700s-early 1800s marks the decline of absolutism in Europe, with Enlightenment and nationalist ideals offering different perspectives to examine how these monarchs navigated shifting perceptions of legitimacy and authority. The three cases I will be examining are King

Philip V of Spain (1700-1746), Jean Baptiste Bernadotte of Sweden (1815-1844), and Emperor Maximilian of Mexico (1864-1867). These examples were selectively chosen as they provide a diverse range of outcomes for a more versatile analysis, while having sufficient control variables such as military strength, Western ideologies, and previous political turmoil to isolate the targeted actors. All three rulers shared western-influenced philosophies of power, emerged from previous instability, and possessed military resources throughout their reign. King Phillip of Spain, despite hailing from the French Bourbon dynasty, was able to remain on the throne, possessing absolute authority until his death, establishing stability for his predecessors as an absolute monarch, constituting a success. Jean Baptiste Bernadotte also maintained traditional power until his death, allowing his descendants to flourish until the modern day, representing another resounding success. Alternatively, Maximilian was unable to maintain a prolonged period as a monarchical ruler, lasting three years until being executed by Mexican officials, signifying a complete failure.

All three case studies will be evaluated using four distinct independent variables to ensure consistency and accuracy when examining each monarch. The independent variables include foreign support, control of the nobility, public perception, and historical precedent. Each variable was selected following a thorough research process into each case study, and deemed the most important factors in the success or detriment of each monarch. While other factors, such as cultural similarity or economics, may influence legitimacy, it is often a contextual or intervening variable that relies on more primary variables. These factors operate as background actors that shouldn't be mixed in with structural or historical context. A strong economy or cultural proximity doesn’t correlate with legitimacy on its own, and therefore should be acknowledged, but not as a priority. The analysis of each independent variable reveals the nature of how foreign-born monarchs obtained legitimacy by putting forth the following hypothesis: I. Foreign monarchs who have a higher level of foreign support will be more likely to maintain and establish power than those having very little international support II. Foreign-born monarchs who have a higher level of control of the political elite are more likely to maintain and establish power than those struggling to control the nobility and elites III. Foreign-born monarchs who have popular support amongst the general public will be more likely to maintain and establish power than those who are deemed unpopular by the masses. IV. Foreign-born monarchs who rule a nation with a historical precedent of monarchy will be more likely to maintain and establish power than those introducing a monarchy to the territory. With the framework set by my hypothesis, I proceed to observe each independent variable and how it has influenced the dependent variable: The maintenance and legitimacy of power. Furthermore, each case study will not solely serve as historical instances but as vital tools in evaluating the validity of my hypotheses

Overall, my small N comparative case study of foreign absolute monarchs in Spain, Sweden, and Mexico works to uncover the broader ideas of how legitimacy is established and maintained through prolonged periods. Qualitative data is the most effective method as it provides the most accurate insight into how monarchs were perceived, narratives that sustain authority, and social/historical contexts. Through analyzing the independent variables across numerous unique case studies, the research aims to either confirm my expectations or assess why the initial views were incorrect, thereby advancing academic research on legitimacy.

Spain

Prior to the ascension of Philip V as king, Spain underwent a period of Habsburg control beginning in 1516, accelerating a period of intense glory. The Habsburgs provided a precedent of foreign-born monarchs consolidating power in Spain. This changed with King Charles II, who, due to copious inbreeding, was incapable of producing a male heir. Rather than nominating another Habsburg as his successor, Charles appointed Philip de Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV, as his successor. Upon Charles II's death in 1700, Philip was installed as king, ushering in a new era of absolute rule led by the French Bourbon dynasty.

As a descendant of the Bourbon dynasty, Philip had initial backing from France, while other nations such as Austria, Britain, and the Netherlands favored another Habsburg as the legitimate ruler. This disagreement sparked the War of Spanish Succession that lasted from 1700 to 1714, drawing in numerous European powers. The war was assessed by Philip as an opportunity to enhance legitimacy, accomplished in 1714 with the end of the conflict. Within negotiations for the Treaty of Utrecht, the British established: "By no means bear the union of the kingdoms of France and Spain under the same king," legitimizing Philip as an independent ruler of Spain (Treaty of Utrecht 1713). The treaty was later recognized by the dominant powers in Europe, ensuring international unity of Philip's legitimacy through conflict.

As a previous member of the French royal family, Philip's main ally was France. He signed off on three separate treaties known as the Family Compacts (1733, 1743, 1761), a defensive alliance to ensure increased cooperation and protection of Bourbon interests. Philip's policy was closely aligned with France, ensuring that Spain had a reliable ally to depend upon in times of conflict. Additionally, the desire of the European powers to establish equilibrium provided Spain and Philip with a safeguard against France, serving as a balancing act between French ambitions and the rest of Europe.

Domestically, Philip aimed to reform Spain to resemble their French counterparts in a process known as "Frenchification," perceived as a threat to those dominating Spanish politics. Despite being an absolute monarch, Philip had to contend with the trifecta of opposition, including the church, nobility, and military. To achieve his reforms, Philip pursued centralization, implementing the Nueva Planta decrees (1707-1716), where he "abolished and repealed all the aforementioned charters, privileges, practices and customs" in the kingdoms of Aragon and Valencia (Philip V, 1716). Furthermore, Philip expanded the bureaucracy that reported on behalf of the king, replacing the practicality of regional nobles. Revolts from Aragon transpired but were dealt with through a newly developed centralized military force. To soften the influence of the church, he taxed the clergy and granted Spanish bishops powers previously held in Rome, yet maintained several privileges to gain his favor. His proactive action of centralizing core government structures expanded his legitimacy as the most powerful person within Spain, at the expense of the trifecta.

Philip also utilized reformist and imperial narratives heavily to ensure legitimacy. He would sign government documents as "yo, el rey,"[2] which translates to "I, the king" to emphasize the nature and authority he held as a monarch. He portrayed his administration as much more reformative to enhance the well-being of the public, citing developments in education, medicine, and sanitation across cities. His bureaucracy reinforced this through government letters such as one from the city of Sevilla proclaiming they are, "facilitating by all means whatever may be beneficial to the poor faithful (Rodrigo 1737)."

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[2] Occurs in every letter that Philip V writes and every speech Philip has

Reforms extended into the colonies as well, most significantly the 1720 abolition of the encomienda structure in Chile and Peru, widely welcomed across the empire, with the institution labeled inhumane by a large portion of the Spanish public and nobility. Philip's progress was halted by his deteriorating health, including instances of depression and other mental lapses. His deteriorating mental state allowed the trifecta to take advantage and regain elements of their previous power, particularly in Aragon. Bribery remained frequent amongst the trifecta as a united front against Philip. The church still influenced education and public opinion, while elites and local military officials continued to hold regional sway, however, on a smaller scale.

Philip's perception amongst the Spanish population was much more mixed, with varied responses. Philip's reforms proved to be successful, with many who recognized their improvement in their quality of life compared to the previous Habsburg regime. His government reforms and curated narratives were emphasized in certain newspapers and gazettes. Those in literature embraced Philip's enlightened interests and developments that ushered in a golden age of Spanish writing. Poems such as *El Nuevo Mundo* glorify Philip as "the great Philip Fifth… liberal pouring showers of gold (Moraes 1701)." Economic elites such as merchants and bankers in the empire also supported Philip due to his friendly liberalization and commercialization of trade. Alternatively, Philip faced heavy criticism and scrutiny from those close to his government for his French favoritism and the influence of foreign advisors, who regarded him as a puppet. Satirical writings became common practice during his reign as a way to criticize the king as ruthless and incompetent, the most notable being a panegyric in 1724 which resonated with much of the sentiment in Spain, mocking his perceived glory to comment on his manipulative nature: "Warm'd with an Altar Coal, thy Heart doth pant, To find a *Jesus*, and commence a Saint…O glorious *Philip*, thy great Name shall fly, As far as there is Seas or Earth or Sky (Pennecuik 1724)." Contemporary scholars and advisors distinctly critiqued Philip and the French as "usurpers." His departure from traditionalism damaged his image drastically, particularly amongst the region of Aragon and the colonies, which viewed Philip's reform as a threat to their society. Although many stated their grievances, opposition occurred privately as they understood removing Philip was impractical due to his significant domestic and international support.

Overall, Philip's legacy will remain complex; however, with public advocates, centralization, and international support, he ushered in a prominent Spanish dynasty that maintained stability until the 1800s. He took advantage of competing interests within Spanish politics to derive loyalty that kept him on the throne and slowly shifted societal norms.

Sweden

Until the arrival of Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, Sweden had experienced an evolution of monarchy. Upon independence in 1519, the Swedish king served as a parliamentary ruler until Swedish absolutism in the 1680s. The Instrument of Government, signed in 1719, ended the absolutist period, transferring power to the estates. Although Bernadotte's predecessor gained more power for the monarchy in the 1770s, parliamentary power lingered. Similar to Philip V and Spain, Sweden has a history of success with monarchy; however, unlike Spain, the Swedish parliament has shown its ability to reduce monarchical power, creating tension between the two entities.

In 1809, King Gustav IV Adolf lost a disastrous war against Russia that resulted in parliament ousting him. His 61-year-old brother Charles became king yet had no heirs, echoing the hierarchical crisis that occurred in Spain a century prior. With limited options available, a Swedish parliament member named Otto Mörner chose to nominate French General Jean Baptiste, who had no relation to Sweden, but whose military victories impressed Mörner. Despite parliament initially denying the idea, without an alternative, and public pressure mounting, Jean Baptiste Bernodotte was named regent in 1810, becoming King Charles XIV Johan of Sweden in 1818.

Bernadotte became regent and heir of Sweden during the Napoleonic wars. As a former French general. Napoleon gladly recognized Bernadotte as the Swedish heir to serve as a puppet. In one letter to Napoleon, Bernadotte wrote, "I am entirely devoted to your person, not merely from the strength of my old associations, but from a sentiment that is unalterable (Bernadotte 1810)." With Napoleonic France dominating the continent, Bernadotte's recognition was accepted. However, once Napoleon began to lose power, Bernadotte recognized he needed to align with powers such as Russia and Britain. Bernadotte and Sweden decisively fought alongside the 6th coalition, legitimizing themselves as a reliable partner. Following the war, Bernadotte pursued a policy of neutrality and appeasement to provide stability for his position and for the country as a whole, ensuring international support.

During Bernadotte's reign, the political bodies in Sweden consisted of the parliament known as the Riksdag, a more democratic system than Philip V's political climate. Consequently, Bernadotte couldn't impose the same power to the extent King Philip V could. Additionally, with the integration of Norway (forming the United Kingdom of Sweden and Norway), Bernadotte was forced to contend with a Norwegian parliament that preferred independence. Although Bernadotte had very conservative aims as his reign progressed, he understood the importance of abiding by the Swedish parliament to maintain power. Upon arrival, he converted to Lutheranism to align with the Swedish court, used his own funds to help economically, and implemented societal and educational reforms, believing "industry, arts, and commerce ensure the prosperity, besides increasing the well-being of families (Bernadotte 1810)." He gained the Swedish army's favor with his prior military success, fought in the Sixth Coalition, and used his credibility to align the military to bolster control. His conservatism clashed with the parliament in 1840, as the Swedish parliament called for Bernadotte to resign. However, he remained on the throne after providing concessions to parliament. His integration within Swedish institutions and reforms strengthened his legitimacy as a king who represented Sweden, rather than a foreigner imposing his will.

In Norway, Bernadotte found much more trouble, as unlike Philip and his Spanish colonies, Norway had far more autonomy and power within the realm. Rather than a continued push for centralization, he granted concessions, respecting the Norwegian parliament as a separate entity, promising to "rule the Kingdom of Norway in accordance with its Constitution and Laws; so help me God and his Holy Word (Bernadotte 1818)!" Bernadotte was still able to establish some aspects of domestic unity with the Union Committee in 1839 to discuss issues and promote cooperation. Bernadotte's decision to give Norway autonomy solidified his legitimacy because it was what the Norwegians desired, with works such as "Nore" by Esaias Tengnér, celebrating the Union; "what God has united, let not men separate. (Tegnér 1818). "

Bernadotte initially enjoyed mass popularity for his regency due to his previous success as a French Marshall, inspiring confidence amongst Swedes that he could protect their interests. Once appointed as regent to become king, Bernadotte began creating a narrative rooted in Swedish nationalism and pride. In an excerpt from a speech upon his arrival, he claims, "I have separated myself from the Emperor Napoleon… I can never be repaid but by the happiness of my new country

(Bernadotte 1810).” His efforts fostered supporters, evident in a letter to the Deputation of Dalecarlian Peasants in 1819 as Bernadotte accepted the gratitude displayed by the public (Bernadotte 1819). However, as his reign progressed, Bernadotte became increasingly more conservative to the dismay of the public, censoring liberal media and press. His unpopular censorship culminated in the Rabulist Riots that swept Sweden in the 1830s, following the conviction of journalist and historian Magnus Jacob Crusenstolpe, who had labeled Bernadotte “partly under the old order (Crusenstolpe 1836).” In Norway, he sought to subdue all symbols of Norwegian identity that upset the population. Yet, no significant calls for change occurred largely because of his previous actions that benefited both Swedes and Norwegians. His popularity surged for the remainder of his reign, evident in his Silver Jubilee (25th anniversary), in which people gathered on the street to celebrate the king. Norwegians reconciled with Bernadotte, naming the main street in Oslo in his honor and building a statue of him in 1875, around 30 years after he died. Bernadotte had far more initial popularity than King Philip V due to his embrace of culture and popular interest.

Ultimately, He foresaw the importance of resonating and appealing to the Swedish identity, which he utilized to tremendous success in his unique rise to power. He died in 1844 as a beloved king due to his governmental appeasement and reforms, allowing his son, Oscar I, to ascend the throne peacefully, establishing a monarchical dynasty.

Mexico

By 1860, Mexico was undergoing a fierce civil war between the ruling liberals and the conservatives, who aimed to preserve the traditional structure. Following the Spanish succession in 1810, an initial attempt at a Mexican empire was formed; however, it was swiftly dismantled by a violent uprising, effectively ending the prospect of a monarchy in Mexico. In its place came multiple attempts at a republic, both centralized and decentralized, which all ended at the hands of military coups. Mexico lacked a stable governance to rely upon, like in Sweden or Spain, with the population accustomed to continuous political unrest.

Maximilian’s rise to power came in large part due to European intervention, with the French under Napoleon III wanting to expand their influence in the region. Napoleon, with the consent of the Austrian government, decided upon Maximilian Habsburg as emperor. Though initially hesitant, Maximillian agreed on the condition that foreign support and a free election were to be held. By 1862, French troops continued to capture vast swaths of Mexican territories. Despite heavy resistance in 1864, Maximilian was declared Emperor Maximilian of Mexico out of invasion rather than by election or treaty, like the previous monarchs.

The sentiment in Paris was focused on celebrating French imperialism, which delegitimized Maximilian. Journals at the time, such as *The France* wrote: “It is not only a triumph for the French flag, but also for our principles,” acknowledging Maximilian as the product of French colonization (*The France* 1864). France denied aid, which he continuously begged for, due to its resistance to French domination. Other prominent global players rejected the legitimacy of Maximilian and the Mexican Empire, perceived as a French puppet. US Secretary of State William Seward affirmed this opposition in a letter to the US minister to France, William Dayton, stating, “ It asserts the opposition of this body to any recognition of a monarchy in Mexico (Seward 1864).” Once the US demanded French withdrawal, Napoleon immediately complied.

In terms of governance, during Maximilian's reign, four integral actors dominated Mexican politics: the conservatives, liberals, the church, and the military. The conservative party favored a more centralized form of government with priority for the catholic church. Contrarily, the liberals desired a more decentralized federal democracy with progressive reforms that separated church and state. Catholicism became a fundamental part of Mexican identity, while continuous government coups gave the military a huge sway over politics. Maximilian failed to gain the approval of any of the four actors, undermining his authority and legitimacy as an effective ruler. He alienated himself from the conservative faction that legitimized him, passing and advocating for liberal reforms that contradicted conservative aims. He separated church and state to remove the clergy from his influence, treating the church poorly. The archbishop of Mexico exposed his beliefs in a letter: "It is a proven fact that we have all protested against those two individuals who have pretended to be a government…and that it has never been persecuted with greater animosity (Dávalos 1864-67[3])." This turned both the conservatives and the church against him. In contrast, Philip recognized the importance of the church in Spanish society and allowed it to retain some power, strengthening his own legitimacy. His favoritism towards French troops sparked numerous rebellions among Mexican soldiers, many of whom would defect to the opposition and help the opposition liberal forces capture territory that Maximilian's army possessed. The liberals never supported Maximilian despite his reforms, as they rejected the fundamental idea of a foreign monarch. Leader Benito Suarez constantly advocated for his removal, expressing his disdain in numerous letters, including one to his friend Matias Romero, arguing that Maximilian's administration did "things contrary to the law and the dignity of our country (Juarez 1865)." His governance as a whole angered liberals as Maximilian relied on French aid that never arrived, destroying the Mexican economy. In a letter to his Marshals, he assured: "I trust that the emperor Napoleon will not deprive Mexico of services which are so necessary to her well-being (Maximilian 1864-67[4])." Furthermore, letters to his wife, the Empress Carlota, display his indecisiveness and arrogance, which stagnated governance. Philip V of Spain also faced his share of unpopularity; however, unlike Maximilian, he still had a large support that allowed him to establish some centralization, which Maximilian couldn't accomplish.

Unlike Bernadotte, who arrived to much fanfare in Sweden, Maximilian was very unpopular with the public and immediately faced backlash. Maximilian was under the illusion that the public wanted him as their ruler because he was promised that free and fair elections would take place; however, the French never followed this request. The illusion of widespread support led Maximilian to believe he had the authority to act with no constraint. Maximilian never adopted traditional Mexican customs, angering the population and reinforcing the perception of foreign imperialism. Newspaper outlets such as Ciudad de México, Distrito Federal, México expressed their disapproval by stating, "the Republic collapsed, today displays its colors, caressed by imperial breezes (La Sombra 1865)." He prolonged the fighting as French troops continued to engage in warfare, and the widespread violence was blamed on him as Mexican citizens grew weary of unrest, with the newspaper Diario Imperio claiming, "it demands a swift solution (Diario de Imperio 1865)." His removal of those who opposed his rule (black decree) and exile of the leader of the liberal movement, Benito Suarez, also proved to be extremely unpopular. This all culminated with the execution of Maximilian in 1867, which became a national spectacle within Mexico,

[3] Exact date unclear

[4] Exact date unclear

treated as a celebration of freedom.

Ultimately, Maximilian failed to adapt to Mexico, alienating himself from all aspects of society, preventing him from maintaining long-term legitimacy. His lack of support meant governing was difficult, pleasing neither the common folk nor the elite, diminishing legitimacy. Once French troops evacuated in 1866, and the last sense of "legitimacy" evaporated, Maximilian’s fate was determined. His execution occurred in 1867, a mere three years after coming into power, ending a turbulent and puzzling era of Mexican history.

Results & Analysis

Independent Variables	Historical Precedent	Control of Political Elites	Public Support	International Support	Did They Establish Legitimacy?
Philip V	1	1	1	1	Yes
Jean Baptiste Bernadotte	1	1	1	1	Yes
Maximilian I	0	0	0	0	No

Figure 1: Table Quantifying the Data

Independent Variable 1: Historical Precedent

Outcome: My initial hypothesis was that foreign-born monarchs who rule a nation with a historical precedent of monarchy will be more likely to maintain and establish power than those introducing monarchy to their new territory. Based on the examination of the primary sources from each case study, the hypothesis regarding historical precedent is supported. There appeared to be a strong correlation between having a precedent of monarchy with Sweden and Spain, and foreign-born monarchs maintaining power with Bernadotte and Philip. Having a precedent of monarchical government is an advantage that foreign absolute monarchs could possess because it is a simple way to achieve initial legitimacy. It reduces effort from the monarch as he/she can position themselves as a continuation of tradition. In Maximilian’s case, the lack of any historical precedent hindered his legitimacy because he had to justify not only himself, but an entire institution that usually requires centuries to solidify. Having a precedent also means that one is less likely to accept the idea of being overthrown because it is harder to justify the removal of a form of government that has persisted for a prolonged period of time. Even when Bernadotte and Philip encountered struggles, militarized efforts to overthrow them were not as numerous, as toppling an institution that had proven effective was deemed unwise for the most part. For leaders establishing legitimacy, having a precedent for their form of government is crucial, as it often serves to legitimize the individual. In the absence of a precedent, a ruler must legitimize both their rule and the institution by promoting it as a superior alternative to the existing norms, either through force or persuasion, which decreases the likelihood of gaining widespread legitimacy, evident with Maximilian. Other factors, such as cultural similarity and legal precedent, fall into the broader idea of historical precedent, but don't independently correlate. Both Philip V and Jean Baptiste Bernadotte ruled nations with cultures significantly different from their own, yet both were able to establish legitimacy because they maintained a regime structure firmly established through historical precedent.

Independent Variable II: Foreign Support

Outcome: My initial hypothesis was that foreign-born monarchs having a higher level of foreign support would be more likely to maintain and establish power than those having very little international support. By examining treaties, letters, and agreements, the initial hypothesis is supported. Philip and Bernadotte both enjoyed legitimacy amongst a plethora of regional and international powers that helped them maintain their position. On the other hand, Maximilian endured international shunning, including their perceived French allies, which coincided with Maximilian's failure to preserve power. Obtaining international support is important for domestic legitimacy because it nullifies the threat of external powers. For international support and recognition to be effective, it must derive from major global or regional powers because they possess the most immediate influence. Reliance on a singular nation for support, such as Maximilian, is inherently unstable, as no singular nation can sustain the broader opposition regardless of strength, and it fuels a dependency akin to a puppet state. How to achieve global legitimacy varies, with Philip establishing his legitimacy through war, particularly substantial regional and global conflicts. Due to the scope of these conflicts and the powers involved, the treaties held much more legitimacy. Although coming to power through war can be an effective strategy since treaties can function as a form of legitimacy itself, the means by which a ruler ascends is a secondary variable. Jean Baptiste Bernadotte was elected to power, yet received international support and legitimacy. On the other hand, wars fought on a smaller scale often fail to improve legitimacy because they lack engagement of substantial powers capable of meaningful support, even with peace agreements. The broader concept is that a ruler should gain some form of understanding between numerous regional and international powers initially, which can eventually help build a form of global legitimacy.

Independent Variable III: Political Control

Outcome: My initial hypothesis was that foreign-born monarchs having a higher level of control over the politically elite are more likely to maintain and establish power than those struggling to control the elites. Through research conducted, the hypothesis was supported as both Philip and Bernadotte were able to gain huge swaths of control over the political elites, which helped them maintain power, while Maximilian failed to gain any during his reign. Gaining control of the political elite is often done by appealing to those who elevated the regime into power. For example, Bernadotte recognized that parliament elected him to power, so he established control by following the demands of the parliament in both Sweden and Norway, which ultimately gained him favor. Even Philip, who made sweeping reforms to the aristocracy, retained aspects of the old regime, which he was able to manipulate into solidifying his legitimacy. In contrast, Maximilian abandoned the conservatives who placed him into power, losing potential legitimacy with elites. Completely overhauling political structures without sufficient political support is inefficient because it is unachievable in the short term, when a ruler is most vulnerable. For foreign-born monarchs not elected, the strategy is therefore to bring over noblemen from their home country as a means of finalizing a basis to implement policies that neuter the political elite. Philip attempted an overhaul of the Spanish system because he brought over a bunch of his French nobles, who, in tandem with members of the Spanish aristocracy who wanted change, took decades to come to fruition. Effective governance limits the impact of the nobility to interfere, enabling structural control and the ability to shape laws that consolidate legitimacy without severe difficulties. As political elites scramble to retain their own power, their tolerance for a monarch increases, which allows the slow implementation of laws and decrees that strengthen control. Consequently, control over the political elites enables rulers to impact certain areas that can't operate independently, including economic policy or the rule of law. In the absence of support, a leader lacks the capacity to implement these reforms regardless of their intent. For example, Bernadotte implemented successful policies to fix the economy, while Philip ushered in education reforms because of control over the nobility that granted them legitimacy.

IV: Public Perception

Outcome: My initial hypothesis was that foreign-born monarchs who have popular support amongst the general public will be more likely to maintain and establish power than those who are deemed unpopular by the masses. By analyzing media across many different social classes, I was able to conclude that the hypothesis was supported. Bernadotte received massive fanfare upon accession to the throne and enjoyed continued popularity throughout his reign, while Philip received far more mixed reactions from the public over his rule; however still enjoyed large sprouts of popularity and therefore I considered him to have high levels of support. Maximilian had very little popularity, correlating with his inability to establish legitimacy. Without having any connections or lineage from the previous regime, initial legitimacy must be obtained based on reputation elsewhere to instill confidence. Bernadotte and Philip had pronounced reputations in France and therefore had a lot of support as capable leaders, as opposed to Maximilian, who was relatively unknown and therefore lacked trust from the Mexican people. Furthermore, leaders are usually better off adapting to adhere to traditional customs. As a symbolic figure for a nation, monarchs must align culturally to gain legitimacy as an accurate representation of the people. This is not a matter of being culturally similar, as many scholars believe, but more a matter of being culturally adaptable. For example, despite Jean Baptiste Bernadotte being significantly different culturally from his Swedish subjects and had a high public perception and legitimacy because he adapted and adopted Swedish customs, such as converting to Lutheranism. Governance is the mechanism through which public legitimacy can be maintained as people seek an improved quality of life and benefits that align with societal values, which can be delivered through effective government policy. Therefore, areas like the economy serve as an intervening variable that allows leaders to gain the public's support by enhancing quality of life in accordance with societal values; it is the public support that fuels legitimacy, not the economy itself. Ultimately, public perception is dependent on interpretation, which can alter how this analysis is understood, especially in terms of King Philip V.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the legitimacy of foreign-born monarchs has hinged upon their ability to successfully navigate outside tension with domestic authority. Those who fail to recognize the cultural, political, and societal orders will face difficulty adapting in crucial instances, creating instability. To capture the whole scope of legitimacy in the current climate, analyzing the behavior and models of monarchs in previous centuries provides a valuable insight into underlying political philosophies such as centralization, authoritarianism, and appeasement. By examining numerous factors such as historical context, foreign support, and public opinion, the study of foreign-born monarchs is vital as a view into how legitimacy and governance have been shaped. While I believe the four variables chosen are most essential, it is important to acknowledge the existence of counterarguments for this study, which highlight factors not included in this study, such as economics and cultural similarity. Ensuring economic success is important for maintaining support amongst the public, and cultural similarity may help mitigate the barriers of ruling a foreign country.

The findings justified the hypotheses that having a historical precedent, greater foreign support, greater control of the nobility, and greater public support correlate with maintaining legitimacy successfully. Historical precedent on institutional and public support provides a basis of legitimacy on which a leader could build, even during times of chaos and instability. Greater control of established nobilities prevents domestic uprisings and manipulation, consolidating authority within existing structures, rather than creating new ones. Moreover, Legitimacy is important to be achieved amongst heavy international players that attract nations and reinforce domestic perception. Although maintaining a different culture and context, these theoretical implications provide a framework that can be used to construct further legitimacy theories in contemporary governments.

The next step for future research within the field is to analyze non-Western foreign-based monarchs and how they attempted to maintain power and legitimacy. There have been non-Western foreign-born monarchs across the world, with notable examples being the Manchurian who ruled the Qing Dynasty from 1648 to 1912. As noted earlier, these foreign-born monarchs have distinct and unique conditions, which I would be interested to see how the claims discussed will translate. Additionally, I think future research could surround the impact of post-colonial governments on non-Western nations that have retained the colonial system, and how it shaped political authority and national identity. As the current geopolitical climate is increasingly filled with distrust in unstable regimes, resulting in increasing rebellions and government upheavals, it is vital to recognize the theoretical fundamentals of legitimacy and its interconnectedness with governance to guarantee success.

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ONE BATTLE DOWN, A WAR TO GO: CHRISTIAN NATIONALIST SIEGE MENTALITY DURING TRUMP'S SECOND TERM

Elizabeth Wiederholt

Abstract
This article examines the victim narrative that is present in the discourse of four Christian nationalist influencers surrounding Donald Trump's 2024 presidential election. Lance Wallnau, Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., Dr. Robert Jeffress, and David Barton wield significant influence in certain Christian nationalist spaces and produce regular, popular online content. Drawing on their podcasts, articles, and media appearances during four significant time periods, I conclude that victim narratives tell only part of the story, and that Christian nationalists employ a siege mentality that perceives the rest of the world as against them. As a part of their siege mentality, Christian nationalists feel that they are at war with the rest of society. Within this context, Donald Trump's election was seen as merely a battle victory in the midst of a larger war with a world that is seen to be constantly threatening conservative Christians' way of life. Having a siege mentality increases polarization, reduces willingness to compromise, and justifies political extremism and violence, which makes legislation targeting marginalized groups, hate crimes, and political violence like the storming of the Capitol on January 6 more likely. Narratives present in Christian nationalist spaces are crucial to understand, especially given the increased political and cultural influence of Christian nationalists during the Trump campaign and administration.

Key Words: Christian nationalism, siege mentality, victim narrative, Donald Trump

"Many Americans are feeling a groundswell of enthusiasm about our future. Yes, we've been granted a four-year reprieve from the oppressive fight against Christian values and the blatant efforts to silence our voice." (Jeffress 2025, at 01:26)

Introduction

The Christian right thrives on a sense of embattlement (Kobes du Mez 2021, 241). Their penchant for claiming persecution is well documented (Castelli 2007, 154; Horwitz 2018, 553; McDowell and Ward 2023, 406). Donald Trump, who is seen as a champion or even savior of the Christian right, won his second election in November 2024. As he gave the Christian right and far-right activists increased access to the Oval Office, it seemed unlikely that Christian nationalists could still claim to be victims, as they now had the support of one of the most powerful people in the world (Dias and Graham 2025). Therefore, the guiding research question for this project focused on how the victim narrative used by Christian nationalists shifted post-election, given the increased political access and power that

Christian nationalists enjoyed. Due to the recent nature of Trump's second election, there is little scholarly research about how his second term has shaped Christian nationalist rhetoric. This research begins to fill that gap and to use the framework of siege mentality to explain why Christian nationalists still viewed themselves as victims despite having an advocate in the United States president and gaining increased access to the White House.

As I analyzed the discourse produced by prominent Christian nationalist influencers, I found several key narrative shifts over the studied time periods. As expected, around Trump's election and inauguration, the influencers' rhetoric was more celebratory, though they still highlighted major losses and perceived threats. A few months into Trump's presidency, the rhetoric returned to focusing on the attacks that Christians faced. Instead of seeing Trump as a symbol of their increased influence, my influencers viewed attempts to limit Trump's power as further evidence that they were being victimized. However, I also found that the idea of a victim narrative only captured part of the story. The influencers I examined displayed a siege mentality, meaning instead of simply viewing themselves as victimized by a few groups in society, they saw themselves as in conflict with the entire rest of the world. Within this mindset, Trump's election victory did not constitute an affirmation of Christian nationalist power and access, nor did it signal an end to their struggle. Instead, it was viewed as merely a battle victory in a much longer and still raging war to preserve conservative Christianity in an increasingly secularizing, and in their eyes, hostile, world. When a group holds a siege mentality, their group's survival becomes paramount, and they are willing to take extreme, socially-unacceptable measures to protect themselves, including political violence. This suggests that Christian nationalists could see political violence, hate crimes, and legislation that targets minority groups as not only justified, but crucial for their survival.

Theoretical Concepts

Christian Nationalism

Scholars use many different terms to describe a similar phenomenon, including the Christian right, white evangelicalism, conservative Christianity, conservative evangelism, and more. I focus specifically on the theoretical category of Christian nationalism, a subset of the Christian right, which centers around the belief that the United States is inherently a Christian nation which was founded on and should continue to be governed by Christian principles. Rather than a religious affiliation, Christian nationalism is better defined as a "cultural framework" that promotes Christianity's overt presence in the American public sphere and can be embraced regardless of a person's specific faith practices (Whitehead and Perry 2022, 10). A person's religious affiliation does not automatically dictate their political beliefs, so focusing on a specific denomination would include a diversity of political views. I chose instead to focus on Christian nationalism because it describes a specific political and cultural mindset that is currently very salient in American politics. Regardless of a person's doctrinal beliefs or preferred worship setting, Christian nationalism is associated with support for Donald Trump, an us-them mentality that leads to support for racist policies, a denial that racism exists, and a hierarchy that places women as subordinate to men (Whitehead and Perry 2022, 17).

Jones (2023) argues that Christian nationalist ideas can be traced back to the papal bulls that formed the Doctrine of Discovery to justify colonization under the premises of spreading Christianity, which led to "ideas such as Manifest Destiny, America as a city on a hill, or American as a new Zion…

This sense of divine entitlement, of European Christian chosenness, has shaped the worldview of most white Americans…" (23). Though Christian nationalist ideas have been present in the United States for as long as it has existed at varying levels of intensity, the Christian right's increased political involvement in the 1960s and 1970s brought about a revitalized Christian nationalist movement (Volle 2023). The victimization narrative on the Christian right is inseparable from the Christian nationalist movement, as many of the religious liberty claims and protections that those on the Christian right advocate for are rooted in the belief that the United States is a Christian nation and should privilege Christianity accordingly. Under this mindset, indications that conservative Christians are losing influence in broader American society are seen as threats to Christian's religious liberty, which will be further discussed in the literature review.

Christian nationalism varies significantly by racial group. When referring to Christian nationalism in this paper, I am specifically referring to white, right-wing Christian nationalism. Previous research has shown that race plays a central role in how people experience Christian nationalism, with white Christian nationalists much more focused on conflict and resisting compromise and likely to hold zero-sum beliefs, especially in contrast to Black Americans, with Hispanic and Asian American communities having inconclusive results (Perry and McDaniel 2023, 1264).

Siege Mentality

While narratives of persecution and victimization are present and prevalent within the Christian nationalist movement, those terms only capture part of the story. In response to these feelings of persecution and victimization, I will argue that current Christian nationalist rhetoric embodies a siege mentality. The theoretical concept of a siege mentality was primarily developed by Israeli scholar Daniel Bar-Tal to describe patterns in Israeli Jewish society (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992a, 633). It is characterized by a widespread perception in a society "that the rest of the world has highly negative intentions towards one's own society or that one's own society is surrounded by a hostile world" (Bar-Tal 2012, 997). In other words, a siege mentality is distinct from a victim narrative because instead of simply feeling victimized by one or a few groups, a group feels that the entire world is against them. Whether or not a threat or hostility is actually present is irrelevant (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992b, 252). Societies which exhibit a siege mentality also feel that they cannot rely on anyone to help them in times of danger and that their society is superior to others (Bar-Tal 2012, 997-8). This perception comes from attempts by leadership to isolate their group, "perceived maltreatment of the society by the world," or "the imprint left by past collective experiences" (Bar-Tal 2012, 997-998). Bar-Tal also identifies a siege mentality in countries besides Israel, including the USSR, Japan, North Korea, South African white society, and Iraq at specific time periods throughout their history (Bar-Tal 2012, 997).

A siege mentality can have serious consequences for a society or group of people. It can cause a group to "take a course of action without consideration of international behavioral codes" because they feel that it is essential for their survival (Bar-Tal 2012, 999). A siege mentality can also cause a lack of trust towards other groups, a pressure to conform within the group, and negative feelings towards other groups, including embracing xenophobic or chauvinistic ideas (Bar-Tal 2012, 999). These effects can be amplified when the group exhibiting a siege mentality has political, social, or economic power, because then they can act on those beliefs in a way that threatens their perceived enemies. As the following section establishes, Christian nationalists can draw on a long history of perceived instances of persecution that they believe continue today to frame themselves as persecuted or victimized by a variety of enemies. This research will demonstrate that these Christian nationalist influencers perceived the rest of the world as against them, which fueled their siege mentality. When combined with their power and resources, this can lead to increased instances of political violence, legislation that targets marginalized groups, and an unwillingness to compromise.

Literature Review

Roots of the Victim Narrative on the Christian Right

Christian narratives of victimhood trace their roots back centuries, playing a central role in early Christian literature, which emphasized stories of martyrdom and the difficulties that Jesus' early followers endured (Moss 2012, 13). However, the narrative that Christians were constantly hunted down and murdered was not solidified until later, and though Christians were widely disliked in the Roman Empire before Constantine's conversion, genuine cases of persecution were rare (Moss 2013, 128). In a similar way, though Christians are the hegemonic group in the United States, the narrative of persecution against Christians is common and persistent. Castelli traces this idea of a "war on Christians" in the United States to the post-WWII era, when courts began to rule against overt religious practices in parts of the public square, such as praying in public schools (Castelli 2007, 156). Many Christians saw social movements that arose in the 1960s, particularly feminism and gay rights, as severe threats to Christians' religious freedom (Castelli 2007, 156). Other scholars cite desegregation efforts as the primary perceived threat that motivated the formation of the Christian Right political movement (Bjork-James 2023, 2). Southern right-wing Christians argued that removing tax exemptions of private, Christian, all-white academies founded to preserve segregation after *Brown v Board of Education* infringed on parents' rights to choose where their children were educated (Kobes du Mez 2021, 39). Regardless of the specific reason, socially progressive movements in the 1960s and 1970s are generally seen as the catalyst for the emergence of a very politically-engaged religious right movement. Horwitz (2018) cites the 1960s as the time when victimhood began to emerge as a central theme of American politics in general, with every political group, regardless of history and including right-wing Christians, claiming persecution and a victim status as an advocacy strategy (554).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the conviction that Christians were under attack varied in its intensity, especially depending on the presidential administration, but was defined by a resistance to feminism, abortion, and homosexuality (Kobes du Mez 2021, 134-149). The feeling of threat was only amplified by the terrorist attacks on September 11th (Castelli 2007, 156; Kobes du Mez 2021, 220). The Obama presidency brought a wave of fresh perceived attacks on religious freedom. Provisions such as the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act, the Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage, and the Obama administration's suit against the North Carolina bill that prohibited transgender people from using the bathroom that coincided with their gender identity contributed to the feeling that conservative Christians were losing their control over American society (Kobes du Mez 2021, 240-241). This persisted through the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions on religious gatherings were put in place, which many right-wing Christians saw as an affront to their liberty (Perry et al. 2022, 441). Cases where businesses were sued for denying cakes or flowers to same-sex couples for weddings were seen as evidence of government persecution of Christians and an erosion of religious liberty (Dick 2021, 393; McDowell and Ward 2023, 418). Interviews conducted in a Mississippi evangelical congregation where many churchgoers held or were sympathetic to Christian nationalist beliefs demonstrated a persistent feeling that Christians were becoming a persecuted minority in the United States and could no longer share their beliefs without being ridiculed (McDowell and Ward 2023, 414). Crucially, Americans who named preserving religious freedom as a top priority in the 2020 presidential election were more likely to "support the recognition and establishment of Christianity as the national religion"--which mainstream interpretations would see as expressly the opposite of religious freedom–"while also believing that Christians (and to some degree Jews) are discriminated against and LGT persons (often the target of conservative Christian opposition) are not" (Perry et al. 2022, 722-723). These ideas have impacted government policy and politicians' rhetoric, exemplified by the fact sheet on the Trump administration's White House website that accused the Biden administration of "targeting peaceful Christians while ignoring violent, anti-Christian offenses" (The White House 2025).

Trump and Christian Nationalism

Donald Trump's 2016 electoral success among Christians was seen as shocking to many, who assumed that his lack of adherence to central Christian principles would disqualify him from receiving support from many conservative Christians (Scala 2020, 927). However, while Trump may not appear to be a particularly devout Christian, his aggressive and militant masculinity appealed to many Christian nationalists (Kobes du Mez 2021, 268). Post-election analysis shows that indeed, adherence to Christian nationalism, as opposed to conservative evangelism, was the most important factor in predicting Christian support for Trump: "Christian nationalism motivates Americans–whether they are evangelical or not–to see Trump as the defender of the power and values they perceive as being threatened" (Whitehead and Perry 2022, 16). Many on the Christian right even saw Trump as their savior (Haynes 2021, 3). That support has on the whole not wavered: in the Christian nationalist influencers I studied, Trump was often glorified and portrayed as the protector they had been praying for.

Methodology

I conducted a discourse analysis that mapped the rhetoric of four Christian nationalist influencers surrounding Donald Trump's 2024 election victory: Lance Wallnau, Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., Dr. Robert Jeffress, and David Barton. As the following paragraphs will demonstrate, these influencers were chosen because of their significant influence in faith communities, the political sphere, Christian nationalists spaces, or multiple of these. They were also selected because they each produced frequent online media, had significant online followings, and represented a diversity of views within Christian nationalism. Mohler and Jeffress represent more traditional conservative voices, but despite that, Jeffress is much more supportive of Donald Trump. Barton and Wallnau operate in a very different context than Mohler and Jeffress. Free of any restrictions or accountability that come with leading institutions such as a seminary or megachurch, both are free to take much more controversial positions and have demonstrated their ability to openly peddle falsehoods and retain, or even grow, their popularity. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce each influencer and their context individually:

Lance Wallnau is a charismatic Christian media personality who gained popularity by prophesying that Trump would win the 2016 presidential election very early on in Trump's campaign. He framed Trump as God's chosen candidate, and his videos were popular among Christians who participated in the January 6th storming of the Capitol (Hagen and Nguyen 2024). In the leadup to the 2024 election, Wallnau's Courage Tour journeyed across swing states hosting revival-style political events that combined worship with efforts to elect Donald Trump. He is a prominent proponent of Seven Mountains, a Christian nationalist ideology which claims that Christians must seek to influence and control every part of society (Hagen and Nguyen 2024).

Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr. is a decorated Southern Baptist theologian and minister who currently serves as the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Mohler n.d.). Mohler's influence comes primarily from his position as one of the most influential Southern Baptists in the United States. In contrast to Wallnau, Mohler initially was starkly opposed to Donald Trump. In 2016, according to his blog, he did not vote for Trump because of his character (Gjelten 2016; Mohler 2020). However, after Trump's administration took action on abortion and religious liberty, he wrote publicly about how he reluctantly voted for Trump in both 2020 and 2024 (Mohler 2020; Mohler 2024). He decries the term "Christian nationalist" as a term that the left uses to invalidate conservatives, but believes it is his duty to seek the "maximum Christian moral influence in the society translated even into public policy" (Mohler et al. 2023).

Dr. Robert Jeffress is a media personality, prolific author, and the senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, which boasts 16,000 members ("About First Baptist Dallas" n.d.). He was an early supporter of Donald Trump in 2016, serving on his faith advisory council and even campaigning for him (Martin 2016). He calls Donald Trump "a good friend" and talks to him often (Mackey and Borchers 2025). His Christian nationalist views are unapologetic: for example, he put up billboards in 2018 that declared "'AMERICA IS A CHRISTIAN NATION'" and recently claimed that "America was founded as a Christian nation" on Huckabee Today (Whitehead and Perry 2022, 23; Huckabee 2025).

David Barton has built his career rewriting American history to reflect his view that the founding fathers are fundamentally represented in today's society, and that they relied on the Bible and Christian principles as they formed the political system (Hagerty 2012). Named by Time as one of the most influential evangelists in 2005, his book *The Jefferson Lies* made the New York Times bestsellers list before it was removed from shelves by its Christian publisher, citing its many inaccuracies ("David Barton" n.d.). Many of his claims are thoroughly debunked by historians and journalists. He founded Wallbuilders, an organization that seeks to teach a Christian nationalist history of the United States and support politicians who are aligned with their message ("About WallBuilders" n.d.). Aside from his cultural influence, he has considerable political access; he served on the 2024 Republican national platform committee and recently joined a group of evangelical leaders, including Jeffress, in praying over Donald Trump in the Oval Office (Draper 2024; Casiano 2025).

Wallnau, Mohler, and Barton produce daily podcasts that discuss politics and current events, which were my primary source material for each of them, as they provide a daily insight into how they were viewing recent events. Barton co-hosts his podcast, The Wallbuilders Show, with two other co-hosts, Rick Green and Tim Barton, David Barton's son, who I will refer to collectively as The Wallbuilders. When I use material from the other co-hosts or guests, I explicitly attribute quotes to their specific speakers. Jeffress also produces a daily podcast, but it does not always mention politics or current events, instead sometimes following spiritual themes. For his primary source material, I relied on both his podcast and his appearances in other media outlets, particularly Fox News, to construct his discourse.

To accurately track the victimization narrative that each influencer was producing, I examined their speech during four key points: Fall 2023, Election 2024, Inauguration 2025, and Spring 2025. For my

Fall 2023 time period, I analyzed discourse from October and November 2023, during the heart of Biden's presidency. This allowed me to establish a baseline of the influencers' rhetoric and examine the narratives that they were producing before they knew that Trump would be reelected so that I could accurately track shifts that aligned with Trump's second term. For the election time period, I analyzed speech produced immediately preceding and in the three weeks following Trump's 2024 election to understand these influencers' immediate reactions to an outcome that they, to varying degrees, hoped for. My inauguration time period spanned inauguration day and the three following weeks to see how these influencers reacted to the very first stages of the Trump presidency. Lastly, I studied discourse from March, 2025, to see if any discourse or perceptions had changed once the Trump term had fully begun and became the new normal. Because the victim narrative is inextricably tied with Christian nationalism, I wanted to study if these influencers would continue to claim a victim status when their interests were now represented by one of the most powerful people in the world, whom some of them have intimate access to.

I used Nvivo to code sentence by sentence to analyze the discourses that these influencers produced at each time period. To isolate exactly what language influencers were using to talk about victimization, I used the codes "Religious Liberty," "Evil," "Moral Decay," "Spiritual Warfare,"and "Zero-Sum Power," because these were ways of perceiving their victimization that previous literature has identified. Where I coded instances of victimization, I also noted the targets, including "Children/Unborn," "Parents," "Christians," and "Women." I also coded the perceived enemies, including "LGBTQ+," "Liberals/Elite," and "Pro-choice" to see who in society the influencers thought was victimizing them. Though I began my project with a pre-set list of codes, intending to use a deductive approach, I expanded my list of codes as my research progressed (Mortelmans 2024). I added numerous perceived enemies, and as I noted a constant focus on enemies from all corners of society, I became increasingly aware of the presence of a siege mentality. I added several types of victimization, including "Unjust Prosecution" and "Censuring," as well as "Triumphalism," with child codes "Trump – Christianity's Savior" and "Trump – America's Savior" and "Elon Musk." I also noted where I found militarized language, which I divided into "Culture Wars" and "Spiritual Battles."

Findings

Christian Nationalist Siege Mentality

While there was considerable diversity in the viewpoints of the Christian nationalist influencers I studied in regards to their main priorities, opinions about current events, and religious viewpoints, they shared a common siege mentality that was constant throughout the time periods I examined. Each influencer conceived of the current state of the world as dire, with conservative Christians fighting to preserve their way of life amidst an onslaught of secular and progressive policies and a rapidly changing culture. In other words, these influencers felt that the entire world was against conservative Christians, their "in-group." Mohler (2025a) expressed this shared feeling among influencers when he stated "Well, the fact is that in an increasingly secularized society and with various agendas including moral agendas such as the LGBTQ agenda out in the culture, the religious liberty of Christians is very much at threat" in response to Trump's Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias executive order (0:40). Not only was he concerned about religious liberty, but he perceived a host of threats descending on conservative Christians. Among these were transgender rights, sex education in schools, and legalized sports betting. The language that he uses to describe transgender people and sex education experts demonstrates that he does not perceive these as abstract, but as concrete threats to children and families.

> "'Trans people want to simply be able to go about their daily lives just like anyone else.' Except that's just not true. They do not want to go through their lives just like everyone else… this is not just about some kind of private expression. It's actually about whether a boy should be allowed to play on your daughter's soccer team" (Mohler 2025b, at 06:07).
>
> "You need an expert to be in charge of sex education for children and teenagers in the schools, and you trust these experts to bring their expertise as trained, trusted adults. Now, that raises another issue, which is that this is not just someone who is not a parent, it is someone who is actually displacing parents in this case. It's a lot more serious than it may first appear to be" (Mohler 2023b, at 07:43).
>
> "And eventually, well, it's all a participation in what is now the near ubiquitous reality of gambling reaching its tentacles into almost every element of American life" (Mohler 2023b, at 25:37).

Wallnau (2023) went beyond governmental, economic, and social threats to claim that not only was the entire temporal world against Christians, but another dimension of supernatural forces were also targeting society. He saw progressive social movements as evidence of sinister supernatural tendencies:

> "These Spirits hover over ethnicities so that unless the heart is transformed or renewed so that it is free from the manipulation of this power it will literally hook into demographics and people groups and you'll see the ethnos, the Greek word for the peoples, you'll see them under the power of principalities and they move move in a kind of a group rage, a group anger, a group agitation" (26:35).

As these examples demonstrate, Christian nationalists do not perceive a few threats to their existence, rather, they see the entire world as against them. This is consistent with a pervasive narrative that Christians are in constant conflict with the rest of the world that can be traced back to the early days of Christianity (Moss 2013, 254). They feel that they are battling every sector of society to maintain their beliefs, values, and influence.

An additional element of the siege mentality is the feeling that one's group cannot rely on anyone else for help in times of trouble. According to Mohler (2023a), though the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade,* which was considered a major win in Christian nationalist spaces, "we do need to understand that there is no confidence that the Supreme Court of the United States will rescue us from this [abortion]" (07:39). Over and over again, increased advocacy and intervention by Christians was cited as the only way to get the United States back on track–as David Barton said:

> "And that's where the church and we as individual Christians have to start talking to those around us and making sure they understand what morality is and why it is what it is and and how to get that back in our policy" (Barton et al. 2024, at 25:59).

While Trump's ascendancy to power could be seen as an affirmation that there were politicians and government structures who will rescue Christians and support them, Christian nationalists do not perceive Trump as an outside force. Rather, they see him as part of their in-group, reinforcing the idea that they can only rely on each other to save themselves from these perceived existential threats.

Trump's Election: A Battle Victory in a War

The siege mentality contributes to the feeling that conservative Christians are in a war against the rest of the world. These influencers frequently use militant language, often literally framing their struggle in terms of war. Jeffress (2025) exemplified this by stating: "Although our culture is divided, we are fighting a winnable war because of God's amazing grace" (24:43).

In the aftermath of Trump's election, Wallnau (2024b) also used explicitly military language to discuss this battle against the rest of the world, claiming "if you want to say this is ground zero for Christian nationalism, do it, because we are in the battle now and we're going to see what happens," (02:43) and later, "Wallnau's Warriors are rising and we're a movement, this–Christian nationalists, call it what you will, we're taking ground" (15:40).

Though these influencers are not talking about a boots-on-the-ground war, this language is connected to actual political violence. One Wallbuilders Show's episode featured guest Colton McAbee, who was imprisoned for violently assaulting a police officer during the insurrection on January 6th (US Attorney's Office: District of Columbia 2024). Speaking about his commitment to keep fighting after Trump pardoned him and he was released from prison, he said "Yeah, you know, they have attacked us. So what do they think? We're gonna sit back and be quiet? … I mean, you'd be a fool to think that" (Barton et al. 2025a, at 17:44). This is where the lines between figurative militarized language and actual political violence can be blurred: while the Wallbuilders may not take their militarized language literally, they heralded a man who thought that brutally assaulting a police officer was an acceptable answer to Trump's election loss in 2020, a man who left prison feeling even more victimized by the US government and on their show, committed to keep fighting.

As the previous quotes demonstrate, the Christian nationalist mindset sees conservative Christians as in a war with the rest of society and the world. While the election of Donald Trump may seem to an outsider like an affirmation that conservative Christians are very influential and powerful, the following sections will focus on each studied time period to demonstrate that the influencers I studied perceived it as merely a battle won in a larger war. This has allowed them to fully maintain their siege mentality even as they celebrated a victory, and meant that a few months into the presidency, they began to almost totally focus on persecution and victimization again.

I. Fall 2023: Fighting A Losing War

In October and November 2023, there was a pervasive sense that society was crumbling and the right was facing major obstacles. Not only did the influencers perceive threats at every corner, but they saw these forces as prevailing against their best efforts to resist them. These threats came in many forms, from "indoctrination" in public schools to pro-Palestine protests in the United States. Defeats of conservative candidates and pro-life measures in off-year elections contributed to the feeling that not only were Christian nationalists engaged in a struggle against the world, but they were losing. Mohler exemplified this feeling by declaring that in light of recent media commentary and conservative off-year election losses, the "the liberal culture warriors are winning" (Mohler 2023a, at 21:24).

II. Election and Inauguration: Celebrating A Battle Victory

Trump's election and inauguration marked a significant change in the narrative. There was a prevailing sense that Trump's election was a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dark world. Wallnau heralded Trump's election as not just a political victory, but an endorsement of Christian nationalism and an event that would herald a reformation.

> “You've been taught, oh be away, stay away from politics, oh, Christian nationalism. Well I'm going to tell you something: buckle up, buttercup because you're going to be watching a whole new redefinition of what the Reformation looks like as Christians engage every sector of society. Christ is not quarantined any longer: we're going into all the world with our ideas, with the anointing, with solutions, and it's going to be a powerful day of, of total Reformation” (Wallnau 2024a, at 0:43).

This triumphant and celebratory attitude was present and strengthened at his inauguration. A common theme emerged that God was giving the United States a reprieve or another chance to right its path towards conservative Christian values. On Fox Friends First (2025), Jeffress claimed that:

> “God was giving America another chance, perhaps our last chance, to turn around. We've been in a downward death spiral as we've been moving further and further away from God's word. Embracing transgenderism that confuses our kids, wavering in our support of Israel, embracing extreme environmental policies” (02:23).

Tim Barton, in Washington, DC for the inauguration, celebrated:

> “And certainly we are very excited to tell people: ‘Go back to DC, tour’–and it doesn't mean there's not wokeism still here–but when you have a commander in chief with really following the direction the American people largely endorsed, of ‘We want to get rid of this wokeness, let’s go back’ to as we talked about from even his inaugural address, putting God first and putting America first as priorities again” (Barton et al. 2025b, at 03:30).

Though each influencer emphasized that there was work to be done, they were hopeful that with Trump as president and the Biden administration gone, policies that they support would be enacted.

One could argue that this celebration represents a significant change in the discourse towards a triumphalist attitude and a clear shift away from the siege mentality. However, despite this celebration, the siege mentality remained very prevalent in the discourse. Trump, seen as a champion or even savior of the Christian nationalist cause, is seen as a part of the in-group; the rest of the world was still rife with threats and intention to harm conservative Christians. For example, the fact that many other conservative ballot issues, including abortion and marriage amendments, lost on election night was a clear sign to these influencers that there was dark precedent being set in other down-ballot losses. Speaking about some of the losses, David Barton said:

> “We lost seven out of ten of the abortion measures. That's not good. There were three states who repealed their marriage amendments saying marriage between a man and a woman” (Barton et al. 2024, at 21:10).

His co-host Tim Barton continued later:

> “...if marriage is not limited to a man and woman, then it can' t be limited to anything. Right. And so this is the problem with removing the moral foundation of rights and wrongs” (Barton et al. 2024, at 21:58).

Tim Barton’s quote highlights that for Christian nationalists, an electoral loss pertaining to same-sex marriage or abortion is not just a political loss, but further confirmation that the United States is losing its moral foundation and an opportunity for immorality and chaos to take over. Wallnau warned of what he sees as current indoctrination in universities as a threat:

> “Well, it means that the universities have been invaded to such an extent that our future leaders are under the wicked indoctrination of crazy ideas that when put before the mass of the voting public they vote against it, they say ‘No, we don't want that,’ but the university and the youth are being indoctrinated right now” (Wallnau 2024b, at 9:16).

III. Spring 2025: Fully Back in Battle

Now that the Trump administration had been in place for a few months, most influencers largely celebrated his policy positions and rhetoric, though Mohler, always more of a lackluster Trump supporter than the others, did not appear to agree with everything that Trump was doing. The constant-threat narrative had largely remained, and most of the influencers perceived Trump as under constant attack along with them. According to Wallnau (2025b), “Democrats are clearly locked step and taking Trump down and paralyzing his agenda but the Republicans are having divisions they're fractionally falling apart” (0:03) and “in other words we're back in lawfare with the devil again and the left controlling Trump” (11:31). After a meeting and prayer with Trump, Jeffress recalled on Fox News Night (2025) that he “thanked him [Trump] first of all for having the courage to push back against these leftist judges who are trying to destroy our country by not allowing the president to perform his God-given and constitutional mandate to protect citizens” (1:03).

Wallnau and The Wallbuilders also turned abroad to find instances of perceived persecution that serve as warning signs. In light of Marine Le Pen, a “Trumpian figure” in Wallnau’s words, being suspended from running for office in France, Wallnau (2025a) warned:

> “Folks, we're hitting a point now where the populist movement–even in the United States–is being thwarted by the invested elites that have the money and the power and they'll find the legal apparatus to overturn the will of the people” (Wallnau 2025a, at 1:14).

Amidst celebrating an article reporting that Bible sales had risen in the UK during a “Good News Friday” episode, David Barton described alleged persecution of Christians praying outside abortion clinics in violation of Britain's buffer zone laws:

> “If you haven't seen it in Great Britain, they're actually arresting people for praying silently. They go to them, say: ‘Were you just praying silently?’ ‘Yes, I was’ and they get arrested, so it's unbelievable, the level of persecution that's going on in Great Britain, what had been, you know, a Christian bastion” (Barton et al. 2025c, at 24:06)

Evidently, Christian nationalists had now moved on from the celebrations associated with Trump taking office. Though someone they perceived as a part of their in-group holds immense amounts of power, they nevertheless viewed the rest of the world as totally against them. They drew on international examples where abortion protestors and far-right candidates were facing legal trouble to build the narrative that Christians and conservatives are persecuted, and closer to home, see the judicial system’s role in preventing some of Trump’s agenda as further proof that the world is out to get them.

Conclusion

Overall, in my study of four Christian nationalist influencers, I found a consistent siege mentality, characterized by the belief that their in-group, conservative Christians, were combatting a world that was full of threats and ill will. These threats came from every part of society: the government, progressive social movements, public schools, other countries, other religions, and more. This manifests in the militarized language that these influencers commonly use: language of culture wars, clashes of worldviews, and spiritual warfare. While many of them may be largely referring to metaphorical battles and wars, the lines are slippery, as evidenced by their support for violent activists that advocate for their goals.

In the midst of this perceived war that Christian nationalists are fighting, Trump's presidential victory was seen as merely one battle victory in a long war. Throughout his election, inauguration, and early presidency, Christian nationalists found good cause to celebrate: someone who championed many of their causes was now in the White House. However, the siege mentality remained constant, and rather than remaining triumphant into Trump's presidency, most influencers continued to focus on the threats they perceived after he took office, including efforts to prevent Trump's policy goals from taking effect.

Conceptualizing the narrative within Christian nationalist spaces as being part of a siege mentality allows for a fuller understanding of the mindset of many Christian nationalists. While a victim narrative is certainly present, a victim narrative in itself is not enough to explain why, even when the situation changes so that Christian nationalists are in positions of power, there is a persistent feeling that they are fighting a war against the world. Additionally, a siege mentality better describes the feeling that the entire world is against conservative Christians, not just a few key enemies, and that they can only rely on themselves for help. Conceptualizing the victim narrative as a contributing factor to the siege mentality helps more accurately describe how Christian nationalists view themselves and the world.

Christians wield extensive power in the United States, and Christian nationalists currently exert considerable influence over the executive branch as well as other areas of government. Jeffress and Barton recently attended a meeting with Trump in the Oval Office, while Wallnau campaigned with Vice President JD Vance over the summer (Casiano 2025; Hagen and Nguyen 2024). However, a siege mentality does not depend on an actual threat being present (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992b, 252). It is precisely the power that Christian nationalists currently have that makes their siege mentality dangerous and crucial to study. Many beliefs that characterize Christian nationalism, when translated into policy or even just widely shared, can put lives at risk, increase political violence, and erode democratic institutions.

For one, the policies and rhetoric that Christians nationalists promote can have life-threatening consequences. A return to Biblical principles, from a Christian nationalist lens, means, among other things, banning abortion and stigmatizing queer people: two proposals that have life-threatening consequences for individuals. Anti-abortion policies have led to multiple instances of women dying because they are unable to access lifesaving best practices. LGBTQ+ children who face bullying, harassment, and discrimination have a higher risk of suicide, and elevating voices who see the LGBTQ+ rights movement as a symptom of evil in the world will increase that (The Trevor Project 2024). The elevation and glorification of Christianity can also have dangerous impacts for other religious groups. Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric was linked to a surge in anti-Muslim hate groups in 2016, including one whose members were arrested on charges of planing to explode a Kansas apartment building known to be the home to Somali Muslims the day after Trump's 2016 election (Potok 2017).

Moreover, the siege mentality exhibited in Christian nationalists can lead to and justify political violence. When Christian nationalists place themselves in a long line of persecuted individuals, and perceive that victimization today, their first instinct is not to sit down and figure out a compromise. Rather, a natural response when one feels one's family and way of life is threatened is to fight back (Moss 2013, 254). This is reflected in the militarized language that is so popular in these circles, which increases polarization and political violence. It can help explain violent incidents like January 6th, where a mob threatened to impede the democratic transition of power from Trump to Biden. Even if these Christian nationalists do not agree entirely with Trump, their feeling that their religion would be under attack if they voted for Democrats – the previous two Democratic presidents, according to Jeffress, "hated conservative Christianity and everyone who followed it," – motivates them nevertheless to support a president who flagrantly flouts norms and laws in the United States (Fox News Night 2025, at 01:30).

Limitations and Further Research Possibilities

This study was primarily limited in its size and scope. I chose four influencers and examined two to three of their shows or interviews in each time period, which means that in an ideological group this diverse and decentralized, there are certainly mindsets and narratives that were not represented. Moreover, this study only focused on leaders within the Christian nationalist movement, as opposed to regular people who subscribe to Christian nationalist ideas but do not make a career from it. The narratives and mentalities described in this research may not be representative of everyday Christian nationalists. Additionally, my time period was very limited by the constraints of this project, which meant that my data collection stopped in early April 2025. This was still very early on in Trump's presidency, meaning that it is likely the narrative will continue to evolve.

There are many opportunities for further research into Christian nationalism and siege mentality. A more comprehensive study that encompassed more time, especially later into Trump's second term, and more Christian nationalist leaders, including politicians, would be valuable. Additionally, to further understand how the siege mentality impacts Christian nationalists and American society in general, research needs to explore whether everyday Christian nationalists share the siege mentality that their leaders promote, and what impacts this has on politics and polarization in the United States. Moreover, this paper focused on Protestant Christian nationalists, but additional study is needed into the narratives present in other Christian denominations and religions that make up the religious right or subscribe to Christian nationalism.

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