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Original Article

Unsorted Significance: Examining Potential Pathways to Extreme Political Beliefs and Communities on Reddit

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Abstract
Violent political extremists often point to online communities as motivating their behavior. However, researchers studying online exposure to extremism through structural mechanisms such as algorithms have not found strong evidence of their influence. At the same time, models of offline radicalization processes emphasize the importance of personal motivations, such as desire for significance and community, but do not fully account for online contexts. The authors integrate these approaches, which are both interested in worsening political extremism, asking, (1) What are the pathways to extreme content and communities online? and (2) What are the perceptions of extremism in online communities? Through interviews with politically active Redditors, the authors identify three motivations for initial engagement with fringe political communities: political unsorting of the self, political exceptionalism, and virtuous participation. The authors argue these motivations are potentially important seeds of political extremism and discuss the implications for supporting healthy political discourse online.

Keywords
extremism, grounded theory, online communities, political participation, Reddit

Political extremism is on the rise in the United States. Mass shootings are considered an epidemic (Peterson and Densley 2021), terrorist activity on the left and the right has jumped considerably in recent years (Doxsee et al. 2022), and conspiracy groups and beliefs—especially on the political right (e.g., QAnon and the stolen 2020 presidential election)—are now considered "mainstream" (Kunzelman 2021). Such trends are concerning for political stability and have threatened U.S. democracy through events such as the January 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection. This worsening extremism has been studied from several perspectives, including political polarization (e.g., Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), political disinformation (e.g., Green, Brownson, and Fielding 2020; Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess et al. 2018), and political radicalization (e.g., Bélanger et al. 2019; King and Taylor 2011).

We focus on pathways to extremism—specifically how people are initially exposed to extreme beliefs and communities online, their perceptions of what constitutes extremism, and their perceptions of how extremism is enabled in online spaces—and develop a model of extremism that borrows insights from existing research on radicalization

processes and political sorting (e.g., Fiorina 2017; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hafez and Mullins 2015; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). Many political radicalization models predate the Internet and the full adoption of social media into American political life (King and Taylor 2011). A common theme from these models is that political extremism and radicalization often occur in gradual steps, and understanding each step is important (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). However, most research on online extremism focuses on already radicalized communities, neglecting the early stages (Winter et al. 2020). The research that does focus on the initial stages of extreme belief formation tends to characterize it as a technological phenomenon where recommendation algorithms funnel people into insular extreme

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communities (e.g., Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2001). Given social media's undeniable influence on extremism, but also the recent research showing that "algorithmic radicalization" and "echo chambers" are neither as prevalent nor as influential as once feared (Nelson and Webster 2017; Ribeiro et al. 2020), we contribute to a growing a literature that reexamines and retheorizes the early stages of extremism, adding to our understanding of how people are *initially* exposed to and embrace extreme beliefs online.

We do this by examining extreme political belief encounters on Reddit, a popular discussion and news aggregation Web site, frequent object of academic inquiry (Proferes et al. 2021), and known platform for toxic content and communities (Gaudette et al. 2021; Massanari 2017). We interview Reddit users about their motivations for joining and participating in both mainstream and fringe online political communities. These interviews provide several insights into extremism processes broadly and on Reddit specifically. Most important, we find that the concept of political polarization has become so salient that awareness of and resistance to polarization processes are affecting political self-perceptions and understandings of extremism, where engagement with fringe beliefs and communities is seen as a way to resist a polarized (or, as we argue later, more "sorted") and untrustworthy political information environment. We thus theorize that for many people engaging in political discussions online, an important source of "significance" comes from viewing oneself as being "above" polarization processes (i.e., not having beliefs or consuming sources that are distinctively liberal or conservative). We argue that this desire to hold beliefs distinct from mainstream political parties presents an undertheorized pathway by which people are exposed to and convinced by extreme content. In doing so, this study contributes to the literature on political extremism and radicalization (e.g., Bélanger et al. 2019; King and Taylor 2011; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008), specifically in the online space (e.g., Gaudette et al. 2021; Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh 2022; Helm et al. 2022; Massanari 2017). This study also has practical implications for those interested in curbing online extremism.

Extremism Pathways: A Review of Extant Research

To begin, it is necessary to acknowledge the debate and disagreement about the use of terms like *radicalization* and *extremism* (Bötticher 2017; Mandel 2009; Neumann 2013). Although they are used in overlapping ways, we default to the label of "extremism" to describe the nature of the beliefs and communities of interest in this article. This is due mainly to our observation that the label of "radicalization" in recent years has become more tied to implications of violence and terrorism (Borum 2011; Mandel 2009; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). For example, in their oft-cited article on radicalization and violence, McCauley and Moskalenko

(2008) defined radicalization as a "change in belief, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup" (p. 416). We want to avoid this "downstream" assumption of violence and focus on "extremism," a term that has been more clearly delineated between violent and nonviolent forms in the literature; *nonviolent extremism* refers to embracing beliefs and communities, rarely represented on mainstream platforms, that reject the resolution of political disagreement through civil discourse and the maintenance of healthy and transparent democratic processes (Bötticher 2017; Lowe 2017; Striegher 2015).

Still, theories of radicalization offer us many useful insights into the phenomenon of worsening extremism, including describing a "(1) gradual 'process' that entails socialization into an (2) extremist belief system that sets the stage for (3) violence even if it does not make it inevitable" (Hafez and Mullins 2015:960). The conceptualization of radicalization as a gradual "process" has spawned several theoretical models attempting to chart how individuals come to hold extreme beliefs and engage in extremist behavior (King and Taylor 2011). Many of these models, illustrated by a staircase, ladder, or pyramid, describe how subsets of people progress from a sense of victimhood or injustice to holding extreme beliefs (e.g., Hafez and Mullins 2015; Khalil, Horgan, and Zeuthen 2022; McCauley and Moskalenko 2017).

Despite enduring debate on some of these definitional points (see Hafez and Mullins 2015; King and Taylor 2011), scholars generally agree on two variables that drive extremism. First, many models recognize the role of the psychological need "to be someone and to be respected by others" (Bélanger et al. 2019:2; King and Taylor 2011). Explained by the significance-quest theory, Kruglanski et al. (2022) argued that social worth is a universal need that, when absent, creates feelings of social alienation, meaninglessness, and psychological distress. Significance loss typically results from social, economic, and political comparisons where disparities between groups are perceived as injustices. Regaining significance involves creating narratives about who or what is responsible for the deprivation and determining the actions for addressing the grievances (Bélanger et al. 2019). Doing so creates a "cognitive opening" that renders individuals more receptive to extreme ideas (Wiktorowicz 2005).

Social relationships are also critical to the formation of extreme beliefs (Bélanger et al. 2019; Borum 2011; Hafez and Mullins 2015; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). In several models, exposure to a community of like-minded individuals promotes the development of increasingly extreme beliefs and behaviors (King and Taylor 2011). Group contexts can cultivate individual extremism, and entire groups can become more extreme over time (Borum 2011). Being embedded in social networks with those holding extreme beliefs can provide a shared sense of reality and understanding for the (perceived) aggrieved, camaraderie among otherwise alienated and isolated individuals, and in some cases,

can render extreme beliefs or behaviors socially acceptable (Bélanger et al. 2019).

Political Extremism Online

Many of the foundational insights into political extremism processes described earlier predate the Internet and social media but are easily applied to online contexts. Recent public and academic discussions of extremism have become increasingly dominated by questions about how political extremism is manifesting in online spaces. This is for good reason, as extremist personalities and groups have achieved unprecedented exposure through social media platforms, message boards, and content sharing platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Furthermore, numerous perpetrators of extremist violence have themselves addressed or made reference to the online communities that influenced them and in which they participated (Hawley 2018b; Miller 2018; Nagle 2017). Researchers have used digital data to understand the prevalence and causes of the consumption of extremist content, finding both quantitative and qualitative evidence that pathways toward extremism exist: those who consume more extreme content start by consuming less extreme content, and gravitate toward more extreme content over time (Mamié, Horta Ribeiro, and West 2021; Munn 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2020).

However, the exact mechanisms for how people move along these pathways, especially in the early stages, is unclear. One simple explanation is that algorithms are exposing people to extremist content. Pariser (2011) popularized the idea of filter bubbles, wherein social media algorithms show people what they want to see, surreptitiously hiding counter-attitudinal perspectives and information. However, research using digital trace data has shown that people who are politically active online are actually exposed to sources across the political spectrum (Nelson and Webster 2017) and that recommender systems such as YouTube's do not appear to cause users to view increasingly radical content (Hosseinmardi et al. 2021; Ribeiro et al. 2020).

If algorithms are not the primary cause of online extremism, then what is contributing to this phenomenon? Online ecosystems of political media and communities constitute entirely new structural environments where the central concepts discussed previously—social networks and significance—become subject to different dynamics and influences. In terms of social networks, this includes options for anonymity, reduced barriers to observe and join specific communities, the opportunity to "lurk," and increased diversity and visibility of more fringe media and communities (Guess et al. 2018; Nelson and Webster 2017; Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews 2004). These online dynamics interact with psychological motivations like the quest for significance in complicated ways. For instance, Gaudette et al. (2022) noted how a sample of former violent right-wing extremists used the Internet to explore extremist content, communities, and

even art, while offline recruiters encouraged such engagement while also fostering offline social ties that addressed feelings of insignificance and isolation.

We seek to build on such insights, with an eye toward a broader array of outcomes than participation in violence. Specifically, we qualitatively study the processes that lead to individuals experimenting with extreme ideas and communities online and how perceptions of extremism inform how these spaces are initially navigated. Although for some, this experimentation with extreme beliefs and communities may constitute the early stages of radicalization (see Borum 2011), for many more it represents a mild to extreme change in political orientation that affects engagement with political communities, social relationships, and, potentially, voting behaviors. Offline models of extremism do not explicitly consider the ease and opportunity for the reconfiguration of social networks that exist online, something that likely influences how people encounter politically extreme communities. Conversely, recent research using digital trace data has overattributed extremism to digital mechanisms, failing to incorporate how the individual "quest for significance" interacts with and is influenced by the online environment. To better understand these processes, we seek to answer the following question:

> *Research Question 1*: What are the pathways to extreme content and communities online?

Second, because of the extensive research on this subject—and subsequent press and commentary on polarization, disinformation, and extremism—peoples' perceptions of these processes will likely factor into how they navigate political spaces online: whether they think spaces are extreme to begin with and the extent to which they feel susceptible to extreme beliefs and attitudes. And so, in addition to questioning pathways to extreme content and communities, we also address the following question:

> *Research Question 2*: What are the perceptions of extremism in online communities?

Method

Reddit as a Site of Political Discourse

We report findings from 27 semistructured phone interviews with Redditors who engage with mainstream and fringe political communities on Reddit, conducted between January and September 2021. Reddit is one of the most popular web sites in the world, with tens of millions of active users. The site is divided into hundreds of thousands of distinct topic-based communities, called "subreddits," and users choose which subreddits to subscribe to and engage in. Within each subreddit, users create discussion posts that can be "upvoted" or "downvoted" by other users. Highly upvoted content

floats to the top of subreddits, while downvoted content falls into obscurity (Davis and Graham 2021). Until recently, Reddit took a very "hands off" approach to moderation, allowing subreddits to govern themselves, leading to a number of toxic or extreme communities (Massanari 2017:331). Although Reddit has since taken steps to ban the most egregious subreddits, the site continues to be an important source of extreme content, conversation, and recruitment (Grover and Mark 2019; Mamié et al. 2021).

Reddit has been the focal site of numerous studies interested in politics, political identity formation, and extremism (Proferes et al. 2021). Much of this research focuses on Reddit's unique design and features, underscoring the structural mechanisms facilitating toxic behaviors and extremism on Reddit. For example, Massanari (2017:330) argued that Reddit's platform ethos, content aggregation and reward systems, and moderation practices give rise to "toxic technocultures" and movements, such as #Gamergate and the Fappening. Looking at the content posted to r/Incel, a now defunct extremist subreddit dedicated to the grievances of the "involuntarily celibate," Helm et al. (2022) found that the dominant discourses varied among upvoted and random comments on the subreddit. This variation matters, as Gaudette et al. (2021) found that Reddit's upvoting system facilitated collective identity formation on r/The_Donald by normalizing extreme views about Muslims and the left. Against this backdrop, we identified Reddit as an appropriate location to recruit participants who may be experimenting with extreme beliefs and communities.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited from political subreddits through a multi-step process. First, we used Google BigQuery to examine historical data about political participation on Reddit. We searched subreddits that had at least 500 comments in March 2019 and sorted them on the basis of the proportion of comments that mentioned at least one political term (such as *Trump, Biden*, or *Senate*). We manually looked through the list of subreddits and, on the basis of the subreddit name or a brief examination of the top posts on the subreddit, characterized the top subreddits as conservative (e.g., r/conservative, r/AskTrumpSupporters, r/HillaryForPrison), liberal (e.g., r/WayOfTheBern, r/AntiTrumpAlliance), or alternative and dark web (e.g., r/IntellectualDarkWeb, r/JordanPeterson). This classification procedure was used to help us to gather a diverse set of respondents. Our initial list was supplemented by identifying "prototypical" subreddits for each category, and searching for similar subreddits on the basis of user overlap.[1] At each step, we attempted to identify fairly mainstream subreddits as well as those representing fringe beliefs or activist communities.

We contacted the moderators of these subreddits, making public posts on the subreddits where we received permission. We also reached out to individual Redditors with high engagement on our list of political subreddits and privately invited them to participate. Interested Redditors filled out an intake survey on which they provided informed consent, provided demographic and political information, and disclosed the main subreddits on which they engage. Interviews were scheduled through Reddit, and participants were offered $30 Amazon gift cards for their participation.

In total, 27 Redditors participated in this study, with saturation being achieved after 21 interviews (Tracy 2019). The sample was predominately male ($n = 25$), white ($n = 17$),[2] and college educated ($n = 18$).[3] Four participants were non-U.S. residents. Of the 23 U.S. participants, only 5 identified as Democrats and 4 as Republicans. Many participants identified as independents or "other" ($n = 11$). One identified as a "Truther." Two participants did not disclose their party affiliations on the intake survey. Of the 13 "independent," "other," or "did not disclose" participants, nine expressed left, liberal, or progressive views in the interviews, two expressed right or conservative views, and two said that they did not lean any way.

We are agnostic on whether the "radical" label can be applied to participants in our sample as none disclosed explicitly violent activity, without which "radical" is arguably a subjective designation and context specific (Khalil et al. 2022). However, on the question of whether this population is appropriate for studying early-stage political extremism, we believe it is. Many participants were active in fringe, contentious, and nonmainstream political communities, such as r/AccidentallyCommunist, r/Anarco_Capitalism, and r/Qult_Headquarters, where QAnon content is discussed and debated. Even those who were not official subscribers to fringe subreddits still reported engaging with fringe content and posts on Reddit or being fascinated by extreme beliefs (e.g., "I like to...have my finger on the pulse of what crazy people think....And that requires sort of immersing myself in it"; "My own background in this kind of thing is that I'm interested in extreme beliefs"). And some participants explicitly expressed views and behaviors that can be categorized as more extreme, such as belief in unsubstantiated conspiracy theories or participation in illegal and disruptive protests. Given their willingness to engage in fringe ideas and their participation in these communities, we consider this population as one from which extreme communities are likely to draw and who are potentially at risk for deeper engagement with extreme, and even radical, content and social networks.

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[1]Subreddits with high user overlap were found using the Web site Subreddit Stats (https://subredditstats.com).

[2]One participant identified as Asian and one as "other," and eight did not disclose their race.

[3]Seven participants reported having some college education but no degree, with nine participants holding bachelor's degrees and two holding master's degrees.

In phone interviews that were audio recorded, participants responded to a range of questions about their political media consumption and relationship with extremist processes and communities. Questions included how participants became interested in Reddit; the nature of their participation on Reddit; their perceptions and use of other political news sources; if participants were influenced by any external events, relationships, or media personalities; and participants' perceptions of extreme political beliefs and behaviors on and off Reddit, theirs and others (see Appendix A for the full interview guide). Interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes to 2 hours in duration, with the average interview lasting approximately 1 hour and 13 minutes. The flexibility in interview duration gave participants ample time to answer and elaborate on their responses. The interviews were transcribed using otter.ai and uploaded to NVivo for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory and thematic analysis. Grounded theory follows an interpretivist episteme where the "systematic discovery of theory" is generated "from the data of social research" (Glaser and Strauss 2009:3). Grounded theory is useful in this context because there is little consensus on how individuals initially encounter extremist communities and ideas in the online context. Thus, attempts to theorize about these early-stage extremism processes should be driven by the lived experiences and perspectives of those participating in these spaces.

We followed the methodological procedures of thematic analysis to generate theoretical insights regarding the pathways to extreme content and communities online (Braun and Clarke 2006; Tracy 2019). After the interviews were cleaned, the first three authors read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. Through this process, we identified eight initial descriptive categories of data: external events, media use, personal, political behavior and beliefs, political perceptions, Reddit, social media, and miscellaneous. Two research assistants were then trained on these descriptive categories, after which they engaged in primary-cycle coding in which the data were "lumped" into the eight categories (Tracy 2019). As a second step, the data in these categories were "fractured" into smaller slices of information via line-by-line coding for the "essence" of each text (Tracy 2019:220). To do this, the team met regularly over an extended period of time to discuss and categorize texts, identifying "what is present in the data" (Tracy 2019:220). Next, we engaged in secondary-cycle coding, where the initial codes were sorted into relevant patterns and themes in line with the research questions. Finally, we refined and named our themes, extracting illustrative examples from the transcripts. Multiple research team members participated in each stage of this analysis process to ensure consistency and thematic credibility. We discuss these themes in the following

section, using them to propose important theoretical insights about the potential pathways to extreme content and communities online.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to better understand the pathways to extreme content and communities online. To that end, we asked participants what motivated their Reddit use and what drew them to the political subreddits in which they engage. The responses suggest two concurrent pathways: *disillusionment with offline politics* and *incidental exposure* to political communities on Reddit. Participants cited dissatisfaction with the "biased" mainstream media, party politics and polarization, and the inability to engage in productive discussions offline. Meanwhile, participants were already participating in nonpolitical communities on Reddit, where they were exposed to mainstream and fringe political content and communities. Participants eventually saw Reddit as a conducive space for varied *political discussion*, filling a void in their offline lives to engage in politics in a nuanced manner.

Political Disillusionment Offline. Participants on both ends of the political spectrum expressed deep dissatisfaction with the "biased" and entertainment-focused mainstream media. Despite regularly turning to outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and NPR, participants overwhelmingly reported distrust in mainstream media, with two saying, "My trust in domestic mainstream media has gone down year over year" and "There's no one political outlet that I trust." One participant said news organizations are interested only in "making money" and will thus "scare you a little bit" to "make you keep watching." Another participant accused "political commentators on both sides of the aisle" of producing content merely to "cultivate rage." This dissatisfaction with mainstream media was so strong that one participant even denounced networks that support their own political predispositions because of blatant biases, saying, "Watching one person being so obviously biased [Rachel Maddow on MSNBC], even though it was a bias that I agreed with…it's a turn-off." Although participants felt that they were competent enough to navigate the mainstream news landscape, they were still uninterested in having one-sided opinions "spoon-fed" to them.

Participants were also frustrated with political polarization and staunch party loyalty, citing the allegiance to party over ideas as one reason for the declining state of American politics. As one participant stated, "Things have gotten really bad, politically speaking, when it comes to the divide between [people]." Another participant described politics as a "team sport" in which there are winners and losers and few opportunities for dialogue and collective progress. Party

alignment has become a "substitution for personality," such that judgments about character and likeability are now based on voting behavior. Others claimed that partisanship has replaced logic and argumentative merit to the detriment of the voter. Indeed, two participants described how partisans often vote against their interests: "They [small business owners] vote Republican because they think it's in their best interest. But that's really just kind of propaganda that they continue to believe," and "They're like probably not very rich and somehow, they support Trump. I don't know, it makes me sad...people are voting against their interests."

Beyond a general repudiation of polarization in the United States, participants felt unrepresented by the two-party system. This was evident by 11 participants—including those active in explicitly partisan communities—selecting "independent" or "other" as their political affiliation on the intake survey and sympathizing with, if not fully adopting, disparate viewpoints. For example, one participant from New York described himself as a "liberal gun owner" who felt the firearms community should be more open to LGBTQ members. Another participant described themselves as liberal (but not a Democrat), independent, and populist but with some conservative views. Another identified as a bohemian hippie and liberal but considers liberalism to be dead on account of being "too progressive" and "authoritarian."

This mismatch between the perception of others' staunch party alignment and participants' nuanced views made them disappointed with the nature and quality of their offline political discussions. Some participants attempted to avoid political discussions with friends and family, with one saying, "Yes, I try to limit political discussion, but I do have it" and another saying, "I don't go out of my way to talk about it [politics]." Participants discussed the pointlessness of conversing with like-minded individuals, with one saying, "One of the reasons I don't talk about it much is because we all generally have the same political views, more or less." Participants who did discuss politics offline often did so with those who were well aligned to avoid social friction. As one expressed, "I had a workout team that I would join. And we would have good political discussions. We were all fairly well aligned. Our coach was not, so we didn't really speak about it in front of her." In such a sorted and contentious political environment, participants felt misunderstood and intellectually unfulfilled. As one participant explained, "I felt like I was going crazy because I couldn't talk to anybody in my actual life about these [political] issues."

Incidental Exposure to Politics on Reddit. Experimentation with mainstream and then fringe political communities on Reddit initially occurred through incidental and gradual exposure (see also Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex 2001). The majority of participants joined Reddit after casual encounters with the platform or recommendations from friends. One participant's Reddit use started after they "saw it popping up occasionally" and "heard people talking about it." Another

participant recalled their college friend who introduced them to the platform, saying, "in college...someone told me about should be "told me about it"...and I just started going on it and browsing." Yet another shared that "friends would always share links with me that came from Reddit...after a couple years of that, I went ahead and joined."

Participants also cited boredom and curiosity as reasons for their initial Reddit use. As one said, "I was really bored one time....So I made an account to start a turf war between the atheist subreddit and the Christian subreddit." Three participants recalled having "downtime at work," with one saying they had "neighbors in another cubicle" who said, "'Hey, you should try this site out.' And that's where I ended up going." For another participant, Reddit provided much-needed interaction and entertainment when they broke their ankle and were "stuck in a chair for a couple of weeks." For these participants, Reddit was a valuable and exciting place "to fill that procrastination void of random stuff," including video games, sports, movies, anime, science, investing, and "dumb stuff, like memes and videos."

Participants eventually found political communities on Reddit by exploring nonpolitical content, a process made easier by Reddit's layout, design, and recommender algorithm. One explained, "There's usually not a good rhyme or reason to where you're going...never really a pre-determined path." Others agreed, saying that finding political communities on Reddit involved "creeping around" and merely "clicking around on different stuff." One participant said they would simply "browse the main page....And then eventually [find] a few [political] subreddits, the big ones," such as r/politics. Another found Reddit's recommender algorithm helpful in promoting political communities, saying, "They'll [Reddit] be like, 'You might also like...,' and then it will show a list of different subreddits....So I joined [a specific political subreddit] as well once I saw that it existed."

Ultimately, participants described Reddit as a "rabbit hole" where "you just end up jumping around from different subreddit to different subreddit through different comments sections...until one eventually finds political content":

> Non-political things are originally what probably brought me to reddit. And then...you'll see...the car [subreddit]...there might be like a car with Trump stickers plastered all over. So then...somebody goes, "Oh, this belongs in info warrior rides," which is a subreddit dedicated to people that have a lot of political stickers [slapped on] their cars....So...you start reading info warrior rides...but he keeps referencing this, like conspiracy theory on his car...and that takes you to like, a QAnon website or QAnon Reddit...and that's kind of like, generally how you start going down the rabbit hole of chasing some of the conspiracy theories.

Political disillusionment offline coupled with casual encounters with Reddit led to a range of political engagement on the platform—from lurking on general political subreddits (e.g., r/politics) to participating in fringe/extreme

communities (e.g., r/conspiracy, r/Qult_Headquarters). This engagement allowed participants to reject partisan politics and develop "informed" political opinions on the basis of evidence and discussion.

Reddit for Earnest and Nonpartisan Discussions. Participants eventually saw Reddit as a conducive platform for earnest, productive, and nonpartisan discussions. Participants valued the range of political topics facilitated by Reddit's subreddit structure that satisfied their "broad political appetite" and "curiosity" about "a wide range of [political] things." As one participant explained, "I'm on the conservative one [subreddit], I'm on the capitalist one, I'm on the Black Lives Matter one, I'm on Tucker Carlson. . . . If it interests me, I join it." Participants also appreciated how political subreddits could be organized around ideas and personalities, not political parties. Indeed, participants expressed finding "refuge" in subreddits dedicated to the political musings of Andrew Yang, Jordan Peterson, Sam Harris, and Joe Rogan. Several participants referred to themselves as "independent thinkers" or "open-minded," so being able to seek out and find content along the spectrum of political thought was a means of rejecting the partisan politics they so condemned.

Participants also appreciated the "quality" of political discussions and the ethos of users interacting in political spaces on Reddit. Although participants acknowledged that Reddit can be a toxic environment, they described their political interactions as "real," "reasonable," "unbiased," "productive," "good," "deep," and "complex." Because many of the subreddits on which participants engage represent nonmainstream ideas, such as r/anarchism or r/libertarian, participants claimed that the "quality of conversation in those spaces was better" because, as one participant stated, "there's an expectation that people are allowed to disagree with each other on certain points" and "people will actually listen."

Ultimately, participants claimed that Reddit allows them to better understand and develop greater empathy for those with differing, and in some cases, extreme opinions. As one stated,

> I feel like after seeing that they're all not the crazy people that the media portrays them to be, then you start wanting to extend some sort of goodwill . . . like, "Hey, we're all just Americans at the end of the day. Don't have to hate each other."

Paradoxically, some participants expressed engaging in antisocial and extreme behaviors on Reddit, such as "pitting people against each other," and being "adversarial," "aggressive," and "confrontational," despite claiming to value productive and good-faith conversations. In fact, seven participants admitted to being banned from various subreddits, and one said they have to censor themselves or they would be banned. Still, these participants saw this antisocial engagement as better than existing in echo chambers; sending out a "torrent of abuse and profanity towards someone"

was justified if it signaled participants' willingness to interact with someone with opposing views.

Research Question 2

The second research question aimed to understand participants' perception of extremism on Reddit, questioning whether participants thought extremism was growing and the extent to which they felt susceptible to these processes. Overall, participants recognized the *likelihood of extremism* on Reddit. However, participants generally felt *immune* to these processes and saw their participation as necessary to *prevent* extremism.

Reddit as Extreme Space; Unaffected Participants. Participants acknowledged the tendency to move toward more extreme beliefs on Reddit. Some participants generally spoke about Reddit and other social media, with one saying "The gap between people is just growing and growing . . . everything is just so extreme," and another saying, "The views on Reddit have become more extreme . . . that's the way the internet works." Others claimed to have witnessed extremism in their personal networks, with three participants saying, "I do know people who seem to have become more extreme because of social media," "I definitely know people who I feel are becoming more extreme over time," and "There are some users I'm familiar with that went from very, very soft, 'Let's vote. Let's get people elected,' to . . . saying, 'No, we really should kill everybody who disagrees with us.'"

Despite this acknowledgment, these perceptions were outwardly rather than inwardly focused. Many said their views were unaffected by their Reddit participation, with one saying, "[I'm] unchanged, I've never gone towards [the] extreme," another saying, "I would say [my political views have] remained the same," and yet another saying, "Reddit doesn't affect my view." In fact, some participants claimed their views had "leveled out" and become *less* extreme because of their thoughtful participation and willingness to entertain alternative views. As one participant claimed, "I think they've actually become less extreme . . . these communities [have] allowed me to see the way the other side perceives issues a lot better." Another echoed this sentiment, saying their beliefs have "definitely been tempered by exposure to people [on Reddit]."

Some participants acknowledged developing more extreme political beliefs over time, but most attributed this to external events or "objective" information, not any factors related to Reddit's technological or community features (e.g., linked discussions, recommender algorithm, upvotes and downvotes, karma scores). As one participant stated, "I think [my beliefs have become] more extreme, but I don't really characterize that towards Reddit as much. Just what's happened in the world has made me more extreme." Another participant agreed, saying, "I don't basically have any extremist [positions] in regards to things that are not real."

For another participant, Reddit was merely seen as an "information tool" that provides access to political content. Any shift in beliefs that resulted from this content was attributed to "fact checking" the information on Reddit, finding the "original source," and evaluating the veracity of what they discovered.

Extremism as an Individual Issue. Participants perceived extremism as occurring at the individual level rather than at a communal, technological, or platform level. That is, participants felt they could resist becoming more extreme despite their participation in fringe subreddits because they were "self-reliant" and "very skeptical" of the content they consume. Participants dismissed the possibility of becoming more extreme because they have a unique "radar" and "meter" to "spot nonsense." Some of this intellectual superiority was attributed to age and experience; two participants noted being "a little older" and "a lot older," so that they have a firm grasp on what they believe politically and why. Another recalled interacting with extremists offline, which gave them "a few cheats" to "get to the conclusion a little faster" on Reddit. Others felt an inherent immunity to extremism: "I just feel I'm not the type of person that would become radicalized," and "I guess that is just my personality. . . . You've gotta be really aware of what you're reading and why you're thinking your thoughts."

Conversely, participants attributed the extremism of others to negligence and a lack of "discernment." One participant generally saw Reddit users as "extremely vulnerable" and too naive to engage in fringe communities. Another stated, "what drives people to extremism, I think is when they've got nothing . . . or they're very young, and they don't have a lot of experience, that has a tendency to drag people to the extremes." Still another argued that Reddit users should "be open to information," but also "have some discernment on information that is good versus information that is bad." However, the general perception was that the average Reddit user takes political posts at face value and "give[s] their opinions on things that they know nothing about," which can lead to misinformation and the possibility/likelihood of adopting more extreme beliefs.

Virtuous Participation to Prevent Extremism. Not only did many participants feel immune to increasing extremism, but they perceived their Reddit participation as necessary to *prevent* extremism and polarization. This *virtuous participation* took the form of "talk[ing] to people in a serious way," asking questions, poking holes in arguments (for which some participants were banned), providing counterarguments, and direct messaging fellow Redditors to facilitate private conversations. The stated goal was to educate other users based on facts and logic, not to push a political agenda. For example, one participant described how they interpreted peer-reviewed medical literature about vaccines for those on Reddit who claimed they caused additional COVID-19 mutations.

Although some participants enjoyed "call[ing] people out on their bullshit," they still considered it their "civic duty" to prevent extremism. As one participant explained,

> There's absolutely a process by which people are being radicalized in this space. And I think that's the main thing that keeps me on Reddit, because I would rather be able to take young kids that I agree with on a lot of things, and help them find something like Food Not Bombs, or the DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] . . . where they can try to do some real world activism that'll bring about some material change, rather than leaving them there feeling hopeless. . . . I try to do [my] best by talking with these folks . . . saying, "All of these problems you're talking about are real problems, but hooking up with the Nazis and blaming the Jews for them isn't going to fix them because the problem is economic structures, not some ethnic group that a group of political radicals hate."

Participants were aware of how challenging it is to change people's minds on political issues, especially if political beliefs are not fact based. Still, participants perceived *some* dialogue as better than none to prevent extremism. As one stated,

> Maybe 80 percent of the conversation is not productive. Eighty percent is just people yelling at each other, but that's the risk that we take so that 20 percent of the conversation could be productive. And maybe 5 percent of the conversation could lead to improv[ing] the society.

Although there was a clear recognition of extremism on Reddit and other social media platforms, there was little acknowledgment of the potential personal impact of participation in extreme communities. Moreover, participants believed they were uniquely capable of navigating extremist content and because they possessed the appropriate temperament and intellectual capacity to do so.

Discussion

We addressed two main research questions in this article: (1) What are the pathways to extreme content and communities online? and (2) What are the perceptions of extremism in online communities? Participants were drawn to political communities and discussions because of frustrations with their offline political conversations and political media and culture more generally. Even if participants were not actively seeking fringe communities, many expressed being made aware of compelling political discussions that they did not see happening in mainstream channels. Participants also generally did not describe themselves as having become more extreme, but they did express concern over "both sides" becoming more extreme and hostile. Many participants portrayed themselves as above these processes and capable of having more civil, objective, or nuanced conversations that defied polarization processes they saw as worsening over time.
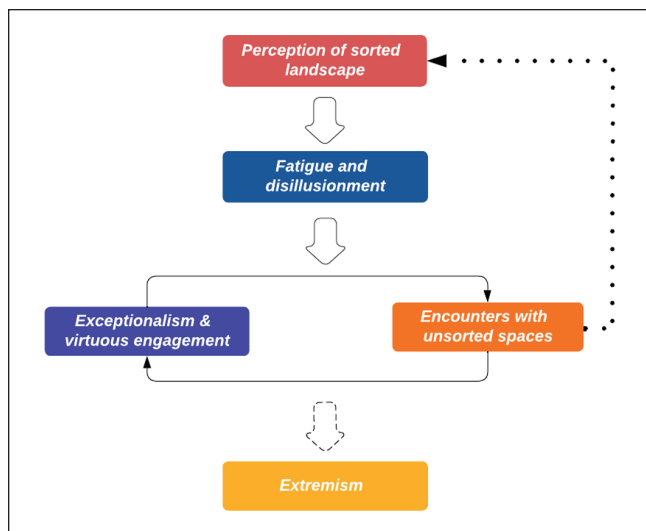
Figure 1. Unsorting the self and extremism.

Although we emphasize that our sample was composed of individuals active on political subreddits, it was not composed exclusively of political extremists, though some of the views, language, and behaviors exhibited by some participants would likely be considered extreme. Still, we argue that the foregoing insights are indicative of a new model of extremism that offers novel understandings for how these processes operate. This model (Figure 1), titled "Unsorting the Self," reflects individual progression to politically extreme communities and viewpoints and is composed of four stages: (1) perceiving a politically sorted landscape, (2) political fatigue and disillusionment, (3) the search for political exceptionalism coinciding with encounters with unsorted spaces, and (4) political extremism. We describe these steps in the following section.

Perception of a Sorted Political Landscape

When asked about the appeal of certain subreddits, participants described being intrigued by arrangements of political beliefs and attitudes they found unrepresented (or underrepresented) in a polarized landscape. Both offline and online, they perceived less room for arrangements of political beliefs that did not fit neatly into partisan categories or were not "down the line" Republican or Democrat. This view of polarization—where political parties themselves are becoming more ideologically homogenous—is referred to as "political sorting" in the social sciences and has been well articulated and empirically demonstrated in a range of studies (Fiorina 2009; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Levendusky 2009).

Originally, studies on political sorting challenged the idea that the United States was politically polarizing because of changes in beliefs and attitudes (i.e., individual Democrats and Republicans becoming more extreme and drifting further apart). Rather, Fiorina and Abrams (2008) found that research showing that Democrats and Republicans have

become more partisan in recent decades can be explained by the fact that ideological liberals and ideological conservatives have become more likely to belong to the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. In other words, individual partisans have not changed their attitudes as much as the composition of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party have become more ideologically homogenous.

One of the primary consequences of this ideological sorting is that a range of issue alignments are increasingly left out of the national political conversation (Fiorina 2017). As sorting leads to the beliefs of Democrats and Republicans getting "tighter"—where within parties holding one belief on something like abortion becomes more predictive of holding other seemingly unrelated beliefs like on foreign policy—people with imperfectly sorted beliefs, like many of our participants, will express dissatisfaction with how their beliefs are represented in the current two-party system (Pew Research Center 2021). Yet on Reddit and other online channels, our participants found political contexts where their political idiosyncrasies, including their more extreme ones, were recognized and validated.

Political Fatigue and Disillusionment

Together with this perception of a politically sorted landscape, participants expressed fatigue with (1) political discourse among friends and family, (2) "biased" or unnuanced political media, and (3) political polarization itself as a process that has corrupted both personal networks and mainstream media as sources of political engagement and information. Notably, this fatigue was usually expressed in terms of political categories becoming too restricting as opposed to them becoming too extreme. Reddit, then, provided an outlet for expressing and engaging with idiosyncratic (i.e., unsorted) political orientations that resonated with our participants or—when they did not necessarily agree them—they at least found interesting because of their novelty. This included more extreme orientations.

As we "noted" earlier, however, many participants did not link this fatigue to active searches for unsorted communities. Instead, many participants described encountering enticing political communities by chance through other subreddits. Through these chance encounters, participants both recognized a space they were looking for and strengthened their view of mainstream media as partisan. This is a crucial distinction, as it indicates an important process of political exploration, often among extreme communities, that is relatively undirected and incidental. We capture this in our model (see Figure 1) with the dotted arrow leading from "encounters with unsorted spaces" to "perception of sorted landscape," demonstrating that for those already frustrated with sorted spaces and those just becoming aware of them, interaction with unsorted spaces exacerbated these perceptions and therefore fatigue and disillusionment. Previous work on incidental exposure and even algorithmic radicalization echoes this insight by identifying the discovery of new and

sometimes extreme political viewpoints and communities online as rarely intentional and often facilitated by specific platforms and media ecosystems (e.g., Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Lewis 2018). Still, disillusionment with a sorted political environment coupled with these structural factors resulted in participants engaging with a wide range of political communities, constituting a link between encounters with unsorted spaces and extremism.

Unsorting the Self: Exceptionalism and Unsorted Spaces

As shown in Figure 1, this fatigue often led to self-sustaining cycles of encounters with unsorted spaces followed by virtuous participation in ways that cultivate feelings of exceptionalism. We define virtuous participation as a style of engagement that recognizes political polarization and extremism as problems and attempts to address it through political discourse. This style of engagement is motivated by, and is an expression of, political exceptionalism characterized by an unsorted orientation. In other words, participants expressed how both performing and communicating the possibility of an unsorted self was politically invigorating and imbued them with renewed political purpose. This, in turn, stimulated increased intentional encounters with unsorted spaces and even more virtuous engagement that helped confirm perceptions of political exceptionalism in a context where the average person unreflectively sorts themselves into mainstream political beliefs and categories.

Participants were finding new possibilities for political expression on Reddit that seemed previously unavailable and sought to communicate these possibilities to others. Meanwhile, participants continued experimenting with new arrangements of political beliefs and attitudes, and the communities that expressed them. We argue, then, that although this process was commonly expressed as a source of political invigoration for our participants, it also represents an important *initial* step into more extreme political communities—and one that people may not see as risky because they view themselves as participating in order to help others and are therefore immune to extremism.

Political Extremism

In Figure 1, the link between this last stage and political extremism is represented by a dotted arrow. This indicates that these data are not sufficient to demonstrate a *definitive* link between the cycle of unsorting and exceptionalism and extremism itself. As we noted, we remain agnostic as to whether our participants are themselves extremists, despite participating in some politically extreme subreddits. However, here we offer one illustrative example of this theorized link, which we believe adds important context to an active research area. Specifically, research on online "alt-right" ecosystems has long recognized the performative

appeal of "authenticity" among extreme personalities and communities, but there has been much less consideration of how authenticity is performed in the context of a highly sorted political environment. The theory of "unsorting the self" addresses this gap.

Scholars (e.g., Hawley 2018a; Lewis 2018; Nagle 2017) studying alt-right movements online have observed that they have gained influence by associating themselves with political influencers who perform varying styles of nontraditional politics. Lewis (2018), for instance, showed how popular alt-right gateway figures (i.e., the "alt-lite") (Hawley 2018a; Ma 2021; Ribeiro et al. 2020) like Joe Rogan, Dave Rubin, and Tim Pool used narratives of being disaffected liberals—and highlight liberal progressive bona fides such as having voted for Bernie Sanders, supporting same-sex marriage, or supporting the Occupy Wall Street movement—to demonstrate objectivity and authenticity. At the same time, these figures have provided friendly platforms for white nationalists and conspiracy theorists, including Alex Jones, Stefan Molyneux, Lauren Southern, Carl Benjamin, and Gavin McInnes.[4] These are just a few examples, but they show how these pathways to political extremism are filled with personalities, communities, and discussions that perform authenticity, novelty, and objectivity by displaying the kinds of unsorted beliefs and attitudes that cannot be neatly categorized as left/ right or Democrat/Republican.

Conclusion

The "unsorting the self" model offers a new framework for studying extremism on online platforms such as Reddit that addresses gaps in current understandings of political extremism and the role of online communities. Through interviewing a sample of Redditors who participate in political communities, including fringe communities, we identified key motivations for exploring political communities online— political exceptionalism, virtuous participation, and unsorting the self—and theorized how these tendencies increase the probability of encountering politically extreme orientations.

With these contributions, we note several limitations. First, we note the relatively small sample size and nonrepresentative demographic makeup of participants. Although small sample sizes are expected and appropriate for qualitative research (Tracy 2019), future research that includes more gender, racial, and educational diversity will lend

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[4]Alex Jones owns and hosts Infowars, where he has propagated conspiracy theories. Stefan Molyneux was a popular YouTube personality who promoted the idea of "scientific racism." Lauren Southern is a prominent anti-Islam and anti-immigration activist. Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad) was also a YouTube personality who promoted antifeminist views. Gavin McInnes founded *Vice* magazine, then went on to found the domestic terrorist group the Proud Boys, which has been responsible for instigating violence at public gatherings, including the January 6 insurrection.

further support and insight into the results reported here. Second, although grounded theory is well positioned to reveal new theoretical insights into nuanced phenomenon, future research should assess the "unsorting the self" model through more deductive and generalizable research designs. Third, the interviews were conducted in 2021, a unique historical period in which the United States and the world were reeling from COVID-19 a contentious U.S. presidential election, and the January 6 insurrection. Many participants noted that some of these issues and events played a role in their exploration of online political spaces, and so we cannot know to what extent these historical particularities affect the generalizability of our findings. Fourth, narratives of "unsorting the self" were used to explain the appeal of a wide range of political subreddits among our participants. This means that we were not able to fully differentiate in what contexts this did and did not lead to engagement with fringe discussions and communities. Future studies should examine variation in these accounts and what might predict engagement with moderate or mainstream communities.

Finally, the unique properties of Reddit noted earlier that have made it a fruitful site of academic inquiry into the kinds of processes examined here also limit these findings in important ways. Perhaps the most important among these is that the long-form and in-depth nature of the "message board" format—along with the threat of downvotes and extended anonymous critique—likely selects for the most engaged and confident political participants. This carries with it the possibility that we were more likely to find ambitions toward an "unsorting of the self" and "virtuous participation" among this group. Therefore, although the implications of this study to understandings of political engagement on Reddit are direct, the different engagement structures and incentives found on other social media platforms should be taken into consideration when considering these conceptual contributions (see, e.g., Proferes et al. 2021). Considering these limitations, we still believe the present research provides a strong case for the connection between political fatigue and unsorting, the search for political exceptionalism, and the potential for engaging with extreme beliefs and communities online.

These results carry two primary implications for social media platforms and policy makers interested in curbing online extremism. First, our model encourages the investment of attention and resources into the promotion of not just "moderate" content but small "unsorted" media sources and communities that embrace political civility and democratic norms while eschewing incivility and democratic backsliding. For example, the foregoing examples of alt-lite performances of unsorted politics often framed the highly sorted landscape as rendering political grievances unaddressable through traditional democratic means, such as voting (Nagle 2017; Neiwert 2017), a tendency that helped fuel the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. However, concerted efforts to provide and support unsorted online spaces that seek reform through peaceful democratic action could guard against antidemocratic extremism and radicalization in many cases.

Second, cultivating a healthy sense of political belonging among the "unsorted" must extend beyond the Internet. Although political sorting is usually framed as a phenomenon that should temper anxieties about political polarization (i.e., it is a good thing that worsening partisanship is partly a mirage caused by sorting), we identify it as a mechanism that potentially increases vulnerability to extreme content and communities. Although it is unlikely that the United States will deviate from being a two-party system in the near future, these results highlight the danger of a growing swath of voters that feel politically homeless and alienated, a danger that, in time, could be addressed by more robust efforts to provide them with stable democratic options to express and enact their political views.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Extremism and Political Knowledge Interview Guide

Note to interviewers: This interview guide is meant as a general guide to your interview. The primary questions (numbered) are the most important questions whereas the probes (lettered) are suggestions for follow-up but do not need to be asked if you think they have been previously addressed. Even numbered questions may have been addressed in a previous question and in these cases it may be OK to skip them altogether. The flow of conversation and the collection of NEW information is the most important task.

Initial Greeting Dialogue

Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. I am a researcher trying to understand how people navigate their political identities and learn about political issues and events. Today, I want to talk with you about your own political background, beliefs, and practices.

Earlier you agreed to allow this interview to be tape recorded, is that still OK with you? [wait for confirmation] Great. Hold one moment. [initiate recording] OK we're recording now and, as I said in my initial message, you have the right to stop participating at any point.

So to begin, I have a few basic questions about how you use Reddit...

Reddit and Online Media/Communities

1. How did you first get interested in Reddit?
   a. Was Reddit the first online community website you really got interested in? If not, what other communities have you spent time on? How did you get interested in those?

b. Were you getting interested in any other online communities around the time you started spending more time on Reddit?
c. Was anything going on in your life that made Reddit or other communities more appealing to you?

2. As you know, we contacted you because you participate in the _____ subreddit. Can you tell me about that specific community?
    a. How did you find out about this community?
        i. If from another subreddit - how long had you been in that subreddit?
    b. What do you think drew you to this community rather than others?
    c. How has your participation in this community changed over time?
    d. Can you tell me about any online social relationships that you maintained while being part of this subreddit?
    e. Do you ever talk with people online or offline about this community? If so, what do you say about it?

3. What was it like managing time as you discovered new communities on Reddit?
    a. Did you ever have to start spending less time in some communities once you found different ones?
    b. How did you make these decisions and how did you view communities you began spending less time at?

4. Tell me about what you liked about those newer communities you mentioned compared to previous ones.
    a. How did they make you feel?
    b. How did they affect how you related to those previous communities or even people in your offline life?

5. How many of the subreddits you participate in would you categorize as political?
    a. How does your participation in political subreddits relate to your participation in other subreddits or other online communities?
    b. How has your participation in politics-focused online communities changed over time?

Note to interviewer: The following question is probably the most important part of this interview section in terms of our research question. Probe here as much as possible and attempt to get some information about the participant's decisions about consuming certain sources, what affects their decisions, and how this has changed over time. At the same time, keep in mind that maybe they really did stumble on a source and there's not really a story there. Believe them and move on when it seems like that's the case.

6. At any point during these processes – talking politics on Reddit and exploring new political sources of information – would you say your views became more or less extreme? Why or why not?
    a. Why do you think your path looked like this compared to others than might have had different experiences (becoming more or less extreme)?
    b. Do you know anyone (else) that you would say became more politically extreme over time?

7. Do you imagine the kinds of online communities you interact with changing in the future?
    a. If so, how? If not, why not?
    b. How do you think these things might be affected by political events?
    c. Can you imagine coming back to some of the communities or media sources that you liked or trusted previously?

Political Media and Influence

8. Now I want to ask you some questions about other ways you consume political content other than on Reddit. As you know, people get their political news and commentary from all sorts of places whether it's on the radio, television, newspapers, or online. So other than Reddit, how else do you get your political information?
    a. Why do you like getting your political information this way? How does it compare to other ways of getting information?
    b. Are there other specific sources or personalities that you prefer for getting political information? Why do you like these sources?

Note to interviewer: As above, the following question is probably the most important part of this interview section in terms of our research question. Probe here as much as possible and attempt to get some information about the participant's decisions about consuming certain sources, what affects their decisions, and how this has changed over time. At the same time, keep in mind that maybe they really did stumble on a source and there's not really a story there. Believe them and move on when it seems like that's the case.

9. Can you tell me about how your political media diet has changed over time? Did you always like [sources just mentioned] or did you arrive there by consuming some other sources before? [If interviewee mentioned in the Reddit portion that their political views/diet changed over time, this is a good place to probe how these changes affect non-Reddit consumption.]
    a. [If their consumption has changed over time] Walk me through how this has changed for you

starting with your first memory of paying attention to political sources.
  i. [For each source mentioned] You mentioned consuming X. Tell me how you first learned about X. How did you decide to first watch/listen? How did you decide to continue watching/listening?
  b. Looking back, how do you feel about the sources you consumed or listened to? Have these feelings changed over time?
  c. [If this hasn't changed for them] Tell me about why you have stuck with your current sources of information.
10. People also get a lot of their views about politics from their family and friends. Do you discuss political news or ideas with people you know? Why or why not?
  a. Why do you think you discuss politics with [*mentioned interlocutor(s)*] and not others?
  b. Do you ever discuss specific things you have seen online or on the news with [*mentioned interlocutor(s)*]*?* Why or why not?

Current Political Behavior and Practices

11. Now I want to ask some questions about your political life beyond just consuming news. Do you ever get involved in politics in other ways?
  a. What kinds of political action have you been involved in? Some examples might be going to a protest, boycotting a brand, or joining an offline group? If so, can you give me an example? How did you get involved with that?
  b. Some people think that sometimes illegal or even violent actions are necessary to achieve positive political change. What are your thoughts on this?
  c. Has anything you've read online ever changed the way you participate or how you think other people should participate in politics? If so, can you tell me more about that?
12. [For U.S. interviewees] Did you vote in the presidential and other elections this past November?
  a. Can you tell me about what made you decide/not decide to vote?
  b. [If they voted] Do you mind sharing with me who you voted for?
    i. [If they voted] Did your experiences with online political media or in your online communities influence your decisions? If so, how?
  c. [If they did not vote] Did your experiences with online political media or in your online communities influence your decision to not vote? If so, how?

Political Background and Identity

13. Now, if it's OK I'd like to ask some questions about your general background. As you were growing up, what are some of your earliest memories of hearing about politics or discussing politics?
  a. Can you tell me about any influential figures in your life that influenced your views?
  b. Were there any particular events in our country or in the world that you remember having an impact on you?
  c. How about personal events? Did anything happen in your personal life that has shaped your political beliefs?
14. How do you think the United States, as a country, is doing right now?
  a. Why do you think this is the case?
  b. What do you think needs to change to make sure the U.S. thrives for the foreseeable future?
  c. How do you think the American people themselves need to change to make sure the U.S. thrives for the foreseeable future? *Note to interviewer: for this question, see if you can get the participant to talk a little about American culture as opposed to opinions on policy.*

Thank you for speaking with me today. I enjoyed hearing about your experiences and thoughts on these issues. Someone will be in touch soon about your payment and please, if you have any questions, you can refer to the initial email I sent you for the appropriate contact information. I hope you have a great rest of your day.

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