moonshot

From Shitposting to Sedition

Tracking and countering conspiracy theories, disinformation and violence around the 2020 US presidential election.

January **2021**

⚠️

This report contains racist material, explicit language and other
content that readers may find distressing.

Report Update

On February 12th 2021, concerns were raised by our partners about the activities of one of the content creators featured anonymously in the first version of this report. As soon as these concerns were raised, Moonshot conducted an initial review and swiftly removed the content from our Redirect Method playlists. We have updated the report to remove screenshots of this content. Where this has been done, a note has been added for transparency.

Moonshot does not create content as part of the Redirect Method. We identify credible content from across the internet and arrange it into playlists which can serve to challenge and provide alternatives to extremism. We identify, review, and select thousands of videos for use in the Redirect Method, globally. Although we have a content review system in place to ensure that material we serve to audiences is suitable for at-risk audiences, and adheres to our 'do no harm' principles, this error has clearly highlighted a gap in our content review systems.

In light of this we are conducting an internal review to make any immediate changes required in our systems. We will additionally be commissioning an external audit of our content review systems to ensure we maintain a robust process for content selection in the Redirect Method.

We are committed to transparency as we grow and adapt the Redirect Method, and will continue to publish our successes and failures as we deliver this method across the United States and globally. If you have additional feedback on the Redirect Method, please reach out to us.

Contents

Introduction

In September 2020, Moonshot CVE partnered with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to proactively monitor and respond to threats of violence and violence-inciting disinformation related to the US Presidential Election. Moonshot produced weekly threat trend reports that informed ADL's direct outreach to state and local election security officials, and also ran nationwide Redirect Method campaigns to provide users demonstrating interest in extremist violence with credible alternative content.

The project unfolded against the backdrop of increased risk of violence by right-wing violent extremists and a global pandemic that has led to unprecedented social isolation and a dramatic increase in internet usage by all Americans, including those most at risk of involvement in right-wing extremist violence.

The months leading up to the election were shot through with grief, grievance and uncertainty: hundreds of thousands of COVID-19-related deaths; social unrest and mass protests in response to the police killings of unarmed Black people; and an electoral process thrown into doubt by disinformation and political polarization.

We monitored and responded to a range of far-right extremist groups and movements that sought to exploit pain and chaos for their own ends. Groups from the Boogaloo Bois and Proud Boys to the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers navigated a diverse range of platforms, including mainstream platforms like Twitter and YouTube and fringe platforms like MyMilitia, Zello, MeWe and Gab.

At the same time, and often in the same spaces, adherents to disinformation theories like QAnon and FEMA death camps wove a web of conspiracy and impending doom about the election, while pinning their hopes on a violent, anti-democratic plot to arrest or assassinate political opponents.

To effectively identify and counter these efforts, Moonshot conducted ongoing online monitoring, collection and analysis to identify rhetorical patterns, slang, memes, events, new platforms, organizations, individuals, merchandise and iconography. ADL used this intelligence to inform state and local actors, while Moonshot used it to enhance and expand its online campaigns.

Moonshot's campaigns targeted every county in all 50 states, allowing us to surge our efforts at the local level in response to events and threats. Over a three-month period, we recorded more than 56,300 high-risk searches and our safeguarding ads were shown more than 34,000 times. At-risk users engaged with our ads more than 1,300 times. These users then watched more than 2,000 minutes of video developed by credible third parties that undermined extremist narratives and promoted a peaceful, responsible response to 2020's uncertainty.

This report summarizes the problems we confronted, the actions we took, and the lessons we learned.
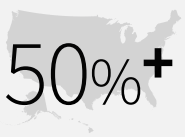
Executive summary

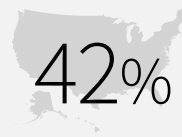56,300 searches related to violence or disinformation around the US election

1,330 engagements with our campaign designed to draw people away from violence

More than 33 hours of counter-content watched by our audience

50%+ Users in **more than 50% of US counties** searched for **how to join an armed group**

42% Users in **42% of all US counties** sought to engage with the QAnon conspiracy

De-escalation: the user journey

How our digital campaigns sought to counter and reduce the threat of election-related violence.

User	Google Search	Intervention	Redirect Content

User

Location: Maricopa County, AZ

Google Search

Join 3 percenters

Redirect Message

Intervention

Ad · www.youtube.com ▾
What do you stand for? | Your values matter.
You can play a positive part. Check out our playlist to learn more and join the debate.

'Armed Groups' Playlist

Redirect Content

▶ YouTube

Insights

The QAnon community began talking about suicidal ideation soon after the presidential election results were confirmed.

Search activity into "how to make explosives/ Molotov cocktails/ napalm," peaked before and after Election Day.

Offline violence escalated from the Million MAGA Marches of November and December through to the Capitol siege in January.

Parts of the QAnon movement are now aligning with anti-vax conspiracies in an attempt to remain relevant.

After the Proud Boys were discussed during the first presidential debate, searches looking to engage with Proud Boys increased by 127% (for example, "forums," "merchandise," "how to join").

Election fraud narratives were propagated by armed groups and militias as early as June 2020, priming the conspiracy for widespread uptake.

Platforms analyzed

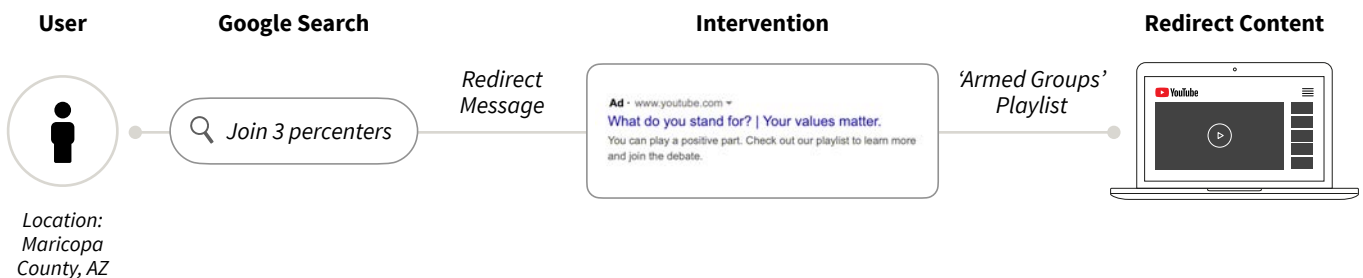| Google Search	Parler	Gab	Telegram	4chan	8kun	MyMilitia	Zello	MeWe

Methodology

Research and targeting

When an individual performed a Google search and that search indicated an engagement or interest in a violent group, narrative, ideology, or action, Moonshot served an ad on their search results page. These ads appeared above organic results, safeguarding that user and the wider ecosystem by offering a contextual, credible and safe alternative to the violent or harmful content they may otherwise have encountered.

De-escalation: the user journey

User	Google Search	Intervention	Redirect Content

Redirect Message

Join 3 percenters

Ad · www.youtube.com ▾
What do you stand for? | Your values matter.
You can play a positive part. Check out our playlist to learn more and join the debate.

'Armed Groups' Playlist

Location: Maricopa County, AZ

At the outset of the project Moonshot monitored and safeguarded searches for an initial 14,000 keywords related to the following search categories:

Armed groups

207 indicators of interest in violent militias and other armed groups, including the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and Christian Patriot movement.

Examples: "Join Oath Keepers Militia," "Timothy McVeigh Patriot," "Waco martyrs," "You call it terrorism I call it patriotism tshirt."

Political violence

13,802 high-risk variations of a searcher's intent to harm presidential and vice presidential candidates and sitting US senators.

Examples: "Kill Joe Biden," "can we execute Susan Collins," "Murder Donald Trump," "I want to shoot Ron Wyden."

Conspiracy theories

68 indicators of curiosity or engagement with anti-government conspiracies

Examples: "FEMA camps," "Waco Government cover up," "Industrial society and its future."

Targeted violence

144 high-risk search phrases without a clear ideological or group affiliation. These were included for monitoring and safeguarding throughout the election period.

Examples: "Anarchist cookbook pdf," "Bomb instructions," "how to make C4," "how to make a weapons cache."

We expanded this initial sample of indicators week on week in response to escalating tension in near real-time (from 14,000 to 125,000 indicators between September and December; see Appendix I). This meant our Redirect campaign was responding to real-world events, sometimes within hours, in order to safeguard the online space and disrupt incitements to violence from armed groups, and the spread of violence-inciting disinformation.

Interventions

The Redirect Method relies on curating and surfacing existing online content as opposed to creating new material. During the rapid rollout of this campaign, Moonshot and ADL identified key narratives increasing the risk of election-related violence from armed groups, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and political polarization; and gathered YouTube content that countered, undermined or simply provided a safer alternative to those narratives.

Content not explicitly created for the purpose of counter-messaging has the potential to undermine violent and extremist narratives when organized and targeted effectively. We identified the most relevant and compelling videos – specifically, those that aligned as closely as possible with at-risk user interest, from a search to join the Proud Boys to a search for the latest Q Drop – and redirected individuals to them. For details on how our audience engaged with our content, see page 43.

A previous version of this report included a screenshot of a content creator featured in our campaigns. As stated in the Report Update, Moonshot has updated the report to remove these screenshots following concerns raised about this content creator. We are committed to transparency as we grow and adapt the Redirect Method, and have updated the Lessons Learned section of this report to highlight our learnings.
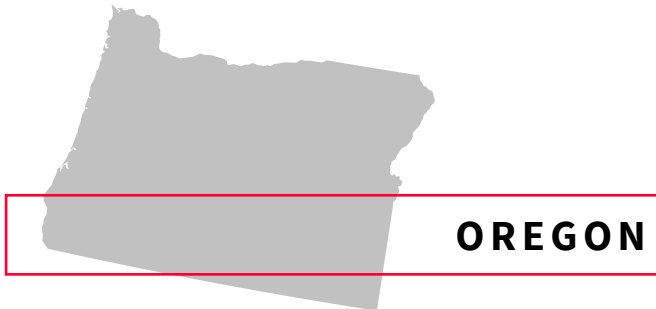
Geographic findings

Geographic findings

Analysis of states with the highest proportion of searches related to election violence

OREGON

Oregon was the location of many high-profile protests and militia mobilizations over the course of 2020. Far-right groups have used the city of Portland's liberal demographic and its mayor's proactive COVID-19 response initiatives as motivation for violence in the city and state at large. Groups' like Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys online pre- and post-event behavior employ disinformation and propaganda to mischaracterize protest-related activities by their Black Lives Matter (BLM)/Antifa opponents. These efforts have contributed to a number of violent confrontations in the state. Organizations involved included Ammon Bundy's burgeoning People's Rights network, which helped to plan and successfully invade Oregon's state capitol on 21 December and orchestrate clashes with law enforcement in Salem on New Year's Day. Likewise, on 6 January, violence between Proud Boys and counter-protesters broke out at Oregon's state capitol. Notably, three participants of the 21 December Oregon capitol raid also participated in the US Capitol siege on 6 January.

Beyond the election, significant events within the state, such as the West Coast wildfires and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, have given rise to even further disinformation in the state. For instance, disinformation regarding Antifa's role in the wildfires and alleged Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) concentration camps in the state grew throughout Oregon's wildfire season. QAnon interest online has also led to offline action. Two Oregon-based politicians, Jo Rae Perkins and Angelita Sanchez, represented the state's QAnon chapter at the Capitol insurrection on 6 January. The politicians leveraged their

social media platforms to propagate QAnon rhetoric, including using Facebook Live to spread disinformation about Antifa's role in the insurrection. At least three "Anons" from Oregon have been arrested following the events in DC thus far, with charges ranging from curfew violation to unlawful entry of the Capitol. Oregon QAnon adherents continue to use social media to build support and mobilize online observers towards offline violence.
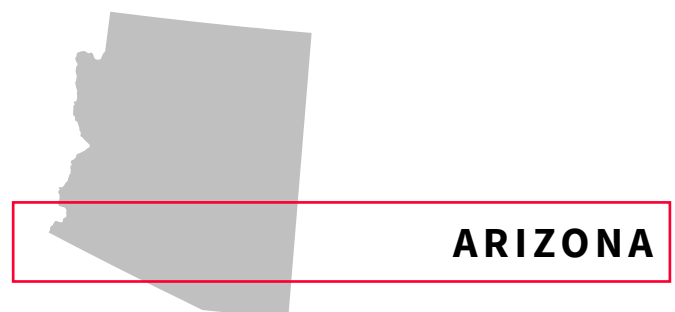
ARIZONA

Interest in armed groups has grown significantly in Arizona throughout the pre- and post-election periods. The state's MyMilitia page had the highest number of new posts created during the election period, with a 44% increase in posts between 15 October and 17 December. Arizona saw a large militia presence and related activism from far-right groups in the pre- and post-election periods, which reached a fever pitch when Arizona's Republican Party enquired if members were willing to die in the effort to re-elect Trump, leading to increased threats of violence against state officials. Consequently, the state's Electoral College ballot casting was held in secret. Notable post-election drivers to violence include community-based paramilitary network, American Contingency, conducting training sessions across the state; Arizona Proud Boys recruiting members online, as well as for the chapters' "Proud Boys' Girls" (the organization's women support group); and Arizona's Three Percenters recruitment efforts through MyMilitia. These efforts have resulted in a large militia presence at Arizona "Stop the Steal" protests, including Arizona's 6 January state capitol protest in Phoenix, AZ.

Analysis of Arizonians' online and offline behavior demonstrates a strong interest in conspiratorial rhetoric, specifically the QAnon movement. QAnon supporters have remained active and organized in the state, specifically in their efforts to prevent Biden's inauguration on 20 January. In anticipation of the 6 January insurrection on the Capitol, "AZ Anons'' flocked to 8kun's /qresearch/ board. Arizona citizen Jacob Anthony Chansley (also known as Jake Angeli), has been charged with violently breaching the Capitol. Angeli, the proclaimed "QAnon Shaman," has gained notoriety since his arrest. Angeli has already become a martyr in the Q-community, exemplified by his praise on the /qresearch/ board as a "true believer." Understanding the messianic tendencies of QAnon, it is likely that Angeli's performance and resulting fame will set a precedent for increased offline action in the future. Some Q supporters have noted that Arizona has "the nation's best gun laws," citing them as an advantage in the crusade against the "cabal". AZ Anons have continued to raise funds for Stop the Steal efforts in 2021, soliciting donations on 8kun, 4chan and Gab for lawyers Sidney Powell and Lin Wood to ensure "full forensic inspection" of election fraud in the state.

> Whatever happened to WWG1WGA? Oh that's right, it's all bunch of fucking horseshit that none you dickless spineless fucking faggots actually believe in. You're here to larp about revolution and sit on your fat asses. None of you are worthy of a true believer like Qanon Shaman.
>
> *Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration.*

QAnon user on 8kun claims supporters that failed to participate in the Capitol Siege are cowards compared to the QAnon "Shaman."
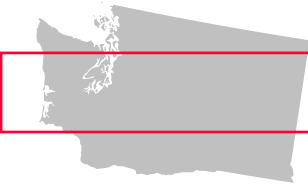
WASHINGTON

The patriot movement has a long history of political activism in the state of Washington. In both the pre- and post- election periods, self-described patriots and armed groups have held a range of protests, from their annual "March for Our Rights" rally to COVID-19 and election-related protests in Washington. Groups including Patriot Prayer, Proud Boys, and WA3% have hosted and promoted protests and election-related disinformation, as well as coordinating efforts to attend rallies in neighboring states. Following these groups' online promotion of the 6 January's DC and state capitol protests, armed protesters traveled from the WA state capitol and to the Governor's Mansion where they broke into the property, resulting in a standoff with law enforcement. Protesters were chanting "Whose house? Our house," a variation of the historically significant chant, "Whose streets? Our streets."

Washington residents also appear to be susceptible to disinformation, especially when it relates to the COVID-19 vaccine. Analysis of Washingtonian activity on the /qresearch/ board, for example, indicates that the community believes the pandemic is a part of politicians' plan to control society. Users warn one another to be wary of the "COVID scam," claiming that the virus is part of a deep-state plot to assert control over the population. Washington's association with major tech companies, namely through its connection to Microsoft and Amazon, is also cause for trepidation among WA Anons. In addition to concerns about Big Tech censorship, Washington-based Q-supporters claim that prominent executives like Bill Gates are at the root of the cabal. One user on the /qresearch/ board theorized that "WA Anons live in the cabal petri-dish," asserting that Washington is the "testing ground for the deep state."

Fuck you inslee 👆 👆

t.me/ 955 👁 edited Jan 4 at 14:24

*Washington-based Proud Boys promote state capitol protests on Telegram ahead of 6 January.*

ILLINOIS

Political tension has grown in Illinois throughout 2020, resulting in increased activism from armed groups and pro-Trump "patriots." Proud Boys and Three Percenters, as well as subscribers to American Contingency in the state, have ramped up activity in the run up to and in the wake of the election. Galvanized by election disinformation, these groups coalesced to participate in Chicago's post-election Stop the Steal protest on 26 November, organized by local right-wing organizations in coordination with the nationwide Stop the Steal organization. Suspected Kenosha shooter, Kyle Rittenhouse, is a resident of Illinois and was seen in the first week of 2021 flashing the white power sign in a bar on the Illinois-Wisconsin border, drawing attention and condemnation from others online. Pages lionizing Rittenhouse, seeking support for him and selling merchandise about him, have become a cottage industry online, and have provided yet another gateway for interested users to access far-right and armed-group communities online. Meanwhile, the Illinois state page on MyMilitia features sixteen militias, which does not include two Lightfoot Militia battalions, Sons of Liberty Illinois, and the White Rabbit militia that bombed the Dar al-Farooq Islamic Center in 2018, also active in the state. Additionally, GPS metadata collected from 68K videos uploaded to Parler prior to its deplatforming on 10 Jan reveal that Scott, IL was among the top ten counties responsible for video uploads to Parler.

In 2020, QAnon made an appearance in Illinois politics. Philanise White of Chicago, who ran against Rep. Bobby Rush in the 1st Congressional District, and Theresa Raborn of Midlothian, who ran against Rep. Robin Kelly in the 2nd Congressional District, have both promoted QAnon on social media. More recently, US Rep. Mary Miller of Illinois quoted Adolf Hitler outside the U.S. Capitol on 5 January. Miller fueled acrimonious attitudes in her statement that "this is a battle," going a step further to say that, "Hitler was right on one thing, 'whoever has the youth has the future.'" While not directly related to the QAnon conspiracy, Miller's direct appeal to far-right extremists and neo-Nazism has been celebrated on the /qresearch/ board. Q-supporters from Illinois and beyond have accelerated their use of anti-Semitic

rhetoric online, sharing mendacious articles that accuse Jews of "brib[ing] and lobby[ing] Congress to pass laws that give victim status and $266.7 billion dollars of taxpayer money to the Holocaust and to Israel." The vicious rhetoric spurred by Miller's statement indicates an appetite for hate crimes within the state, specifically affecting institutions and communities of Jewish faith. IL Anons are also expected to continue their crusade against the "cabal politicians" that have criticized QAnon and President Trump for their role in the 6 January insurrection.
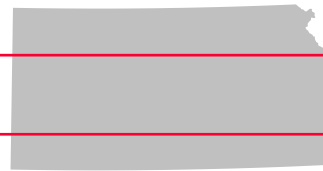
KANSAS

Kansas' so-called "patriot" movement has increased in size and visibility in recent years. Republican incumbents have lost elections to more right-leaning candidates, reflecting the growing trend of the far right going mainstream in the state. Perhaps most notably, on MyMilitia, the Kansas Allied Patriots have been pinned as a featured militia on the site's militias page for boasting high activity in the week of the Capitol siege. There are seven Kansas militias active on MyMilitia, in addition to the state's multiple Lightfoot Militia battalions and the Kansas Security Force. In the wake of the election, threats of violence were made against elected officials with regard to election fraud and COVID-19 restrictions. Subsequently, on 6 January protesters fueled by election disinformation took their cues from the President and protesters in DC, and stormed the Topeka Capitol.

Kansans appear interested in election interference and the #StopTheSteal campaign. Analysis of Kansas-based 8kun activity on the /qresearch board/ shows allegations of electoral misconduct. Kansans also appear interested in the QAnon movement, specifically with regard to explaining the election results through Q's notorious "plan." While online messaging for Kansas-based followers seems to be relatively benign, the group's offline activity indicates there is a broad range of QAnon supporters in the state. In particular, in early November 2020 a group of vehicles adorned with Trump and QAnon symbols paraded the streets of Manhattan, KS. The group's willingness to organize offline could indicate a propensity for further action, especially leading up to inauguration day on 20 January.

Searches related to election violence by State (per capita),
09/16/20 - 12/17/20
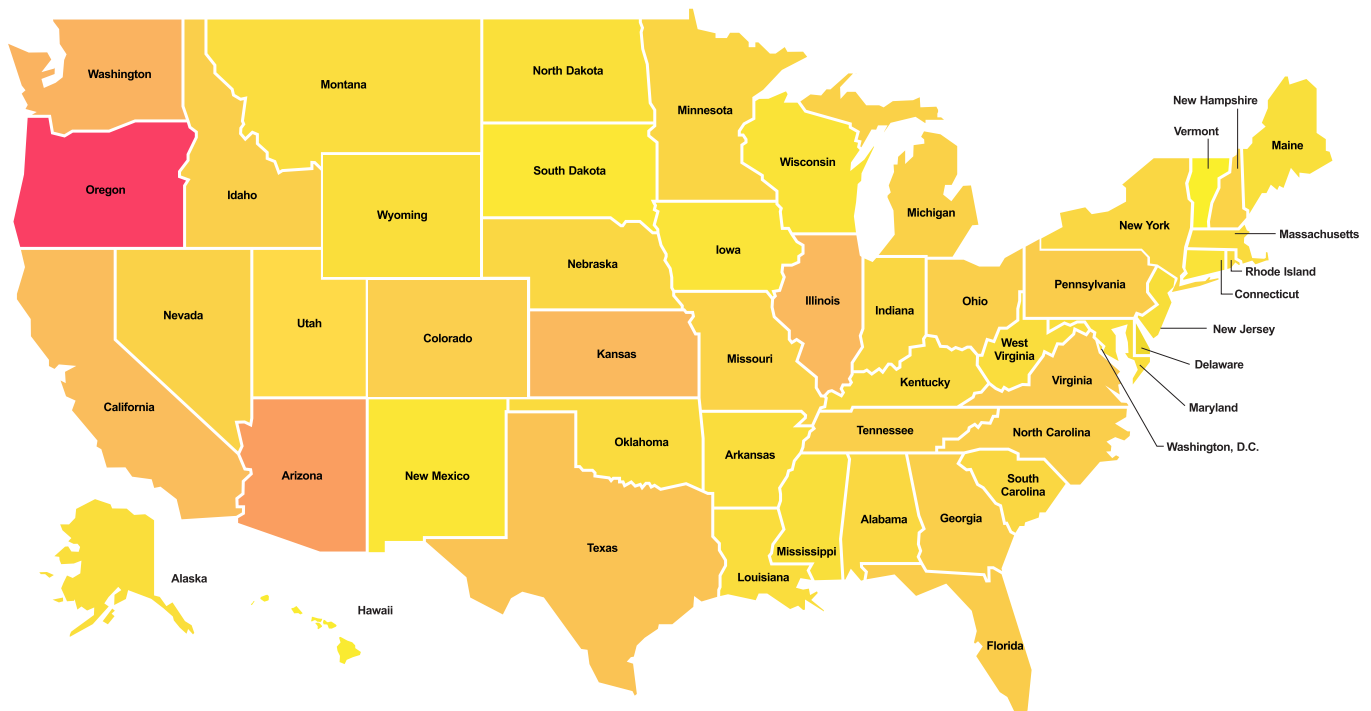
Top ten counties (per capita):

1. Pike County
   Illinois

2. Loudoun County
   Virginia

3. Lake County
   Michigan

4. Pend Oreille County
   Washington

5. Sedgwick County
   Kansas

6. Panola County
   Texas

7. Angelina County
   Texas

8. Fulton County
   Georgia

9. Benton County
   Washington

10. Curry County
    Oregon

Thematic findings

Armed groups

Key findings

▸ There were more than **11,000 searches** across the US for armed groups.

▸ Searches for armed-group merchandise and membership spiked after the Proud Boys were mentioned in the first official presidential debate on **29 September**. The debate bolstered the group's legitimacy within the mainstream political system and tied the Proud Boys' brand – as well as other militia and armed groups – to the President.

▸ Search activity appeared to increase significantly in the build-up to and during the Million MAGA Marches of November and December. The current trajectory of protest violence is concerning, as armed groups continue to plan violent demonstrations online in the build up to the inauguration.

▸ Searchers were most interested in joining the Three Percenters (**6,347 searches**), armed groups' symbols and merchandise (**2,897**), and forums and content (**1,537**).

▸ The top 10 states (weighted by 100k population) were: **Oregon**, **Wyoming**, **Tennessee**, **Arizona**, **Idaho**, **Washington**, **South Carolina**, **Kentucky**, **North Carolina** and **New Hampshire**.

▽ *Searches for armed groups by day*
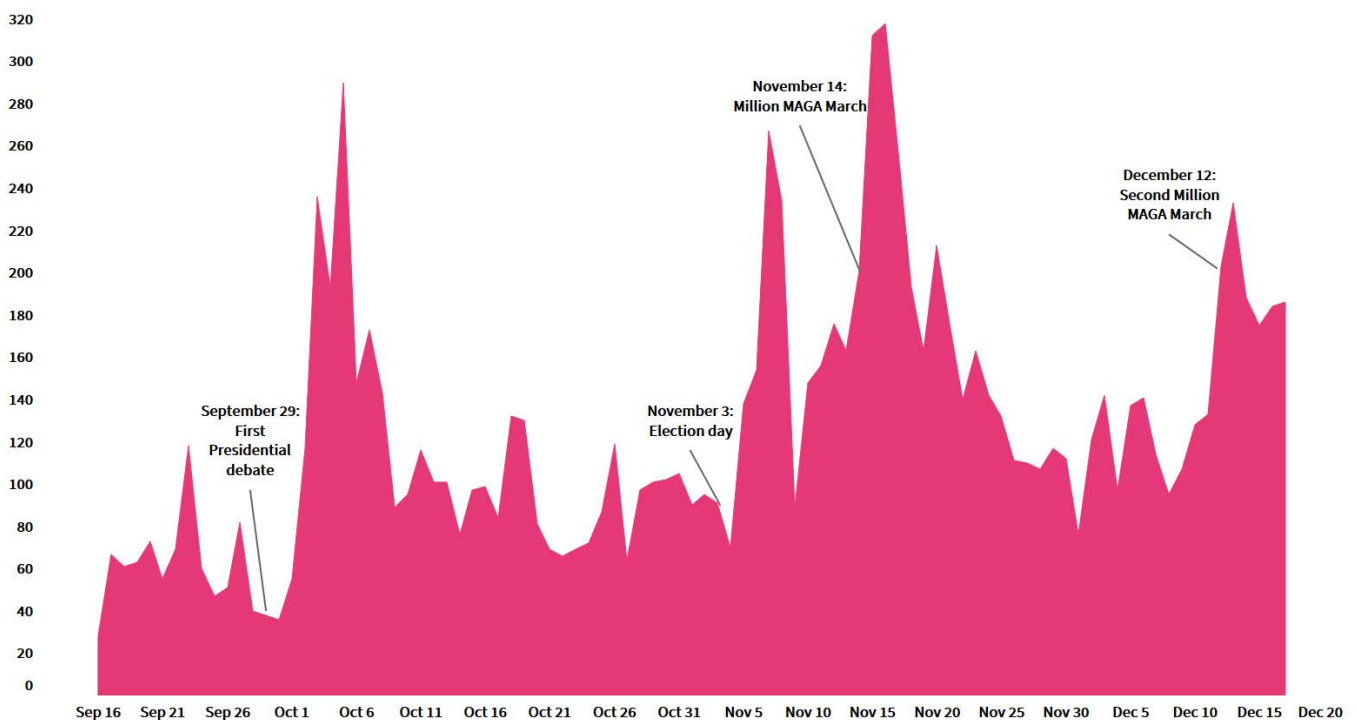
Armed groups publicly moved along a predictable trajectory of violence, from "stand back and stand by," to insurrection on 6 January.

The search trends identified highlight the evolution of armed groups from fringe actors to a highly visible political movement over the course of several months, with search interest spiking after high-profile events, such as the first presidential debate and the two Million MAGA Marches. The mainstreaming of armed groups, their activities and intentions directly contributed to the deadly insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, and may be further fueled by Trump's solidified defeat.

In the months leading up to the 2020 US presidential election, local and national militias were actively propagating disinformation about electoral fraud. As early as June, militias and armed groups were anticipating a "stolen" election. Former US Marine Chris "General BloodAgent" Hill, a leader of the Georgia Security Force Three Percenters militia, claimed in the event of a Biden victory, "We'll take up our arms and our counsel and reclaim this country and our rights. If you try to do this at the ballot box and it doesn't work, you go to the bullets." Accelerationists embraced the notion that the 2020 presidential election could in fact be "America's final election" and would catalyze a second civil war. The events that have transpired in the wake of the election – including two separate Million MAGA Marches and the siege of the Capitol – were unquestionably spurred by the stolen election narrative, with violence as an inevitable conclusion.

Deep dive: The first presidential debate, "Stand back and stand by"

During the first US presidential debate, when asked to condemn white supremacists and militia groups and the Proud Boys specifically, President Trump called on the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." Almost immediately, this slogan became a rallying cry for the group. Our campaigns recorded corresponding and dramatic increases in searches for armed groups and militia in the following days and weeks.
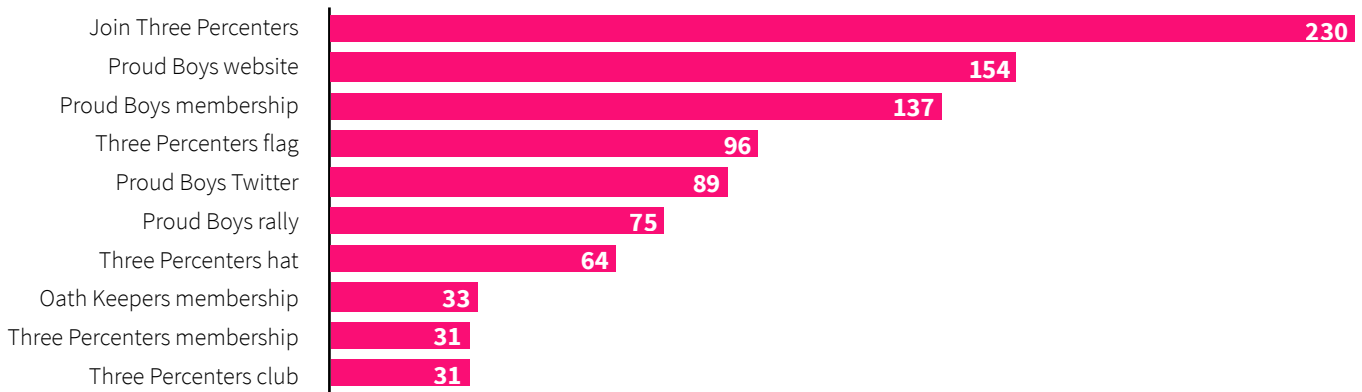
▽ *Searches for armed groups, 22 September to 6 October*
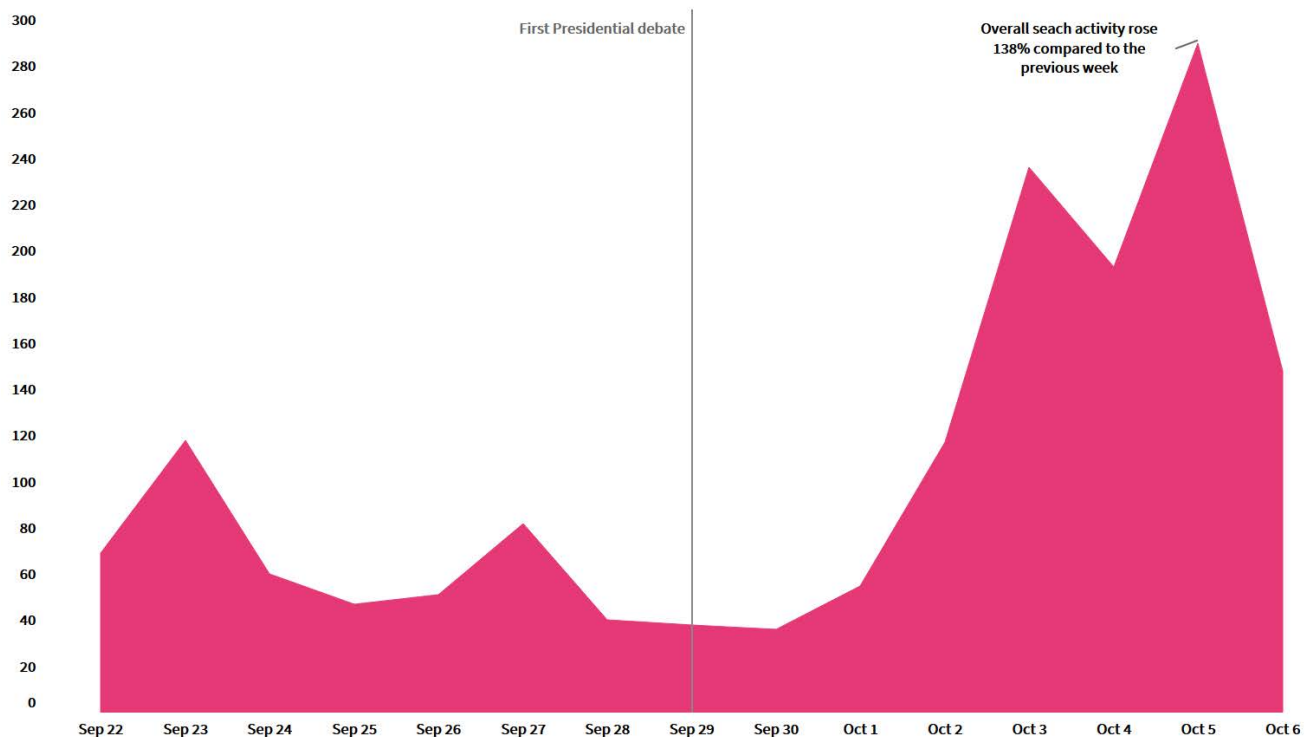
▽ *Top 10 armed group keywords by search volume, 29 September to 6 October*

The Proud Boys describe themselves as "the world's greatest fraternal organization" of "Western chauvinists" who embrace values and policies such as small government, anti-racial guilt, gun rights, and preserving traditional gender roles. Outside of their ranks, they have been underlined described as "misogynistic, Islamophobic, transphobic and anti-immigration." Their disdain for progressivism and the activists who support it drove the Proud Boys to counter-protest at BLM rallies and marches throughout the summer of 2020, as well as participate in anti-mask protests and pro-Trump rallies of their own. These included the Million MAGA Marches in November and December, and the 6 January Trump rally that devolved into a violent insurrection on federal grounds. The Proud Boys have been in operation since Gavin McInnes founded the group in 2016 but their surge into the mainstream did not unfold until last year.

Moonshot's monitoring of the public channels of armed groups and various militia during this period indicated that President Trump's instruction to the Proud Boys contributed to greater visibility, increased membership, and galvanized their existing support base.

▽ *Searches for armed group-related forums and content, 22 September to 6 October*
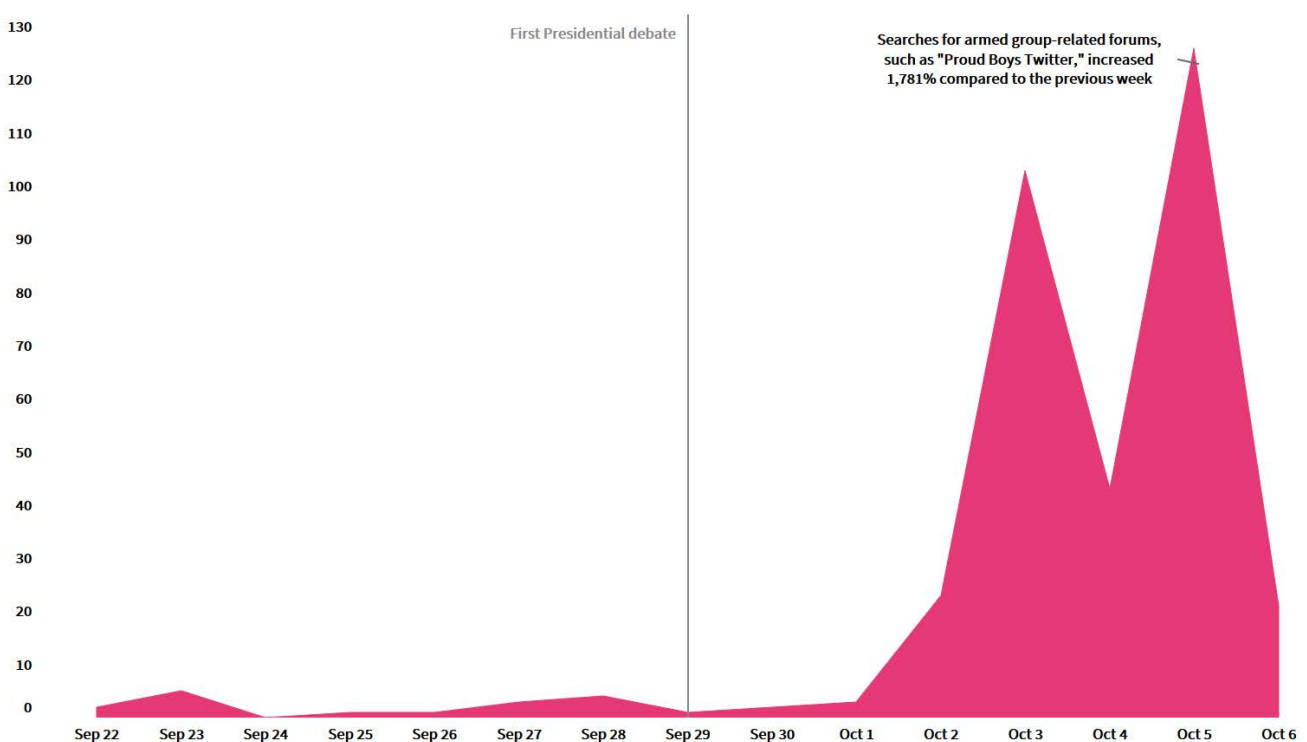
The Proud Boys Uncensored Telegram channel experienced steady growth following COVID-19 lockdowns and racial justice protests, but channel membership surged with 417 new members on 30 September and more than 1.5k new members by 5 October. Likewise, viewership rose considerably on 30 September with Proud Boys Uncensored posts receiving over 240k views.

▽ *Membership of "Proud Boys Uncensored" Telegram channel by day*
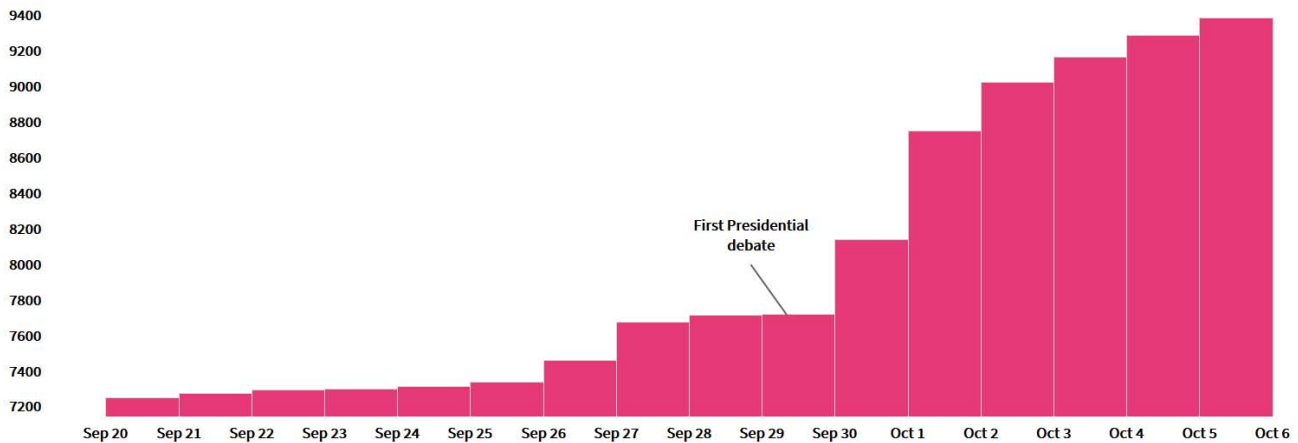
Joe Biggs, a notable Proud Boys organizer, posted the message: "We were called out because they are the only ones standing up to antifa" and claimed, "we have been the only voice of reason." The message received 67k+ views on Parler and 7k+ views on Telegram. The Proud Boys' online store still features merchandise bearing the slogan "Proud Boys standing by" as a nod to Trump's command.

▽ *Searches for armed group-sponsored merchandise, 2 October to 17 December*
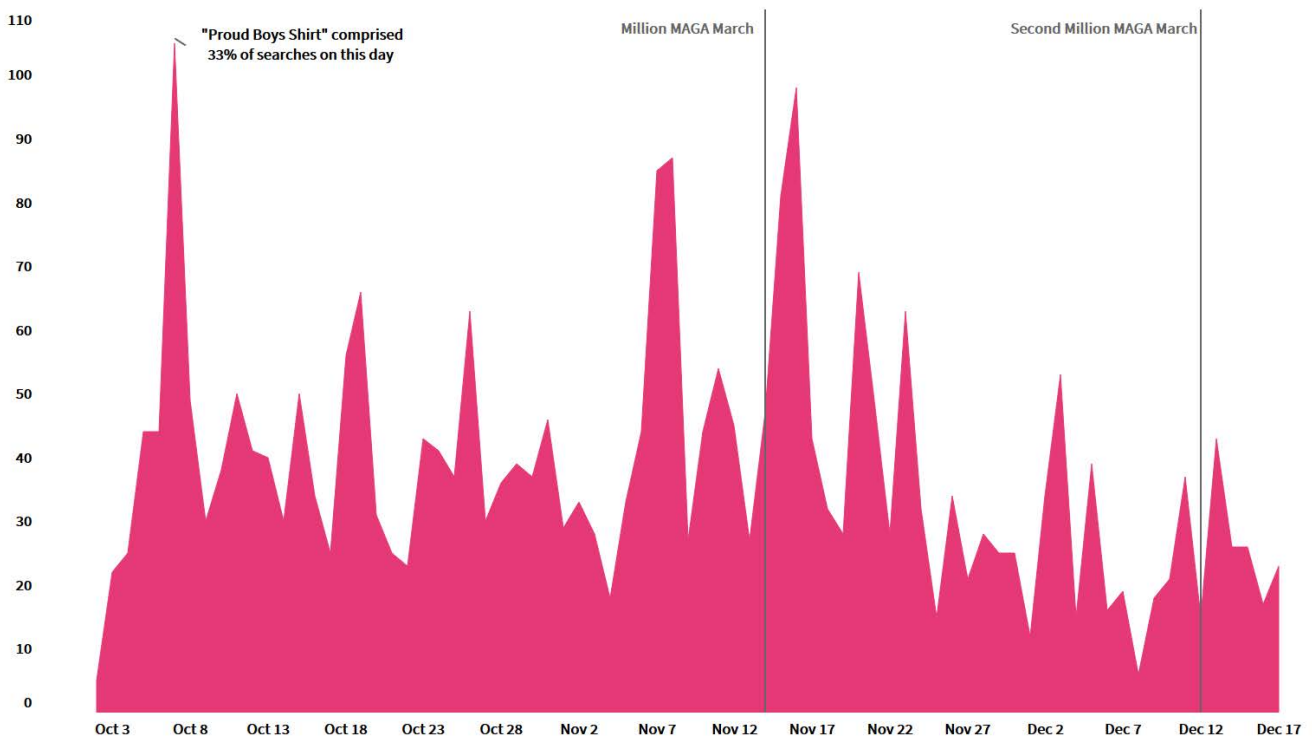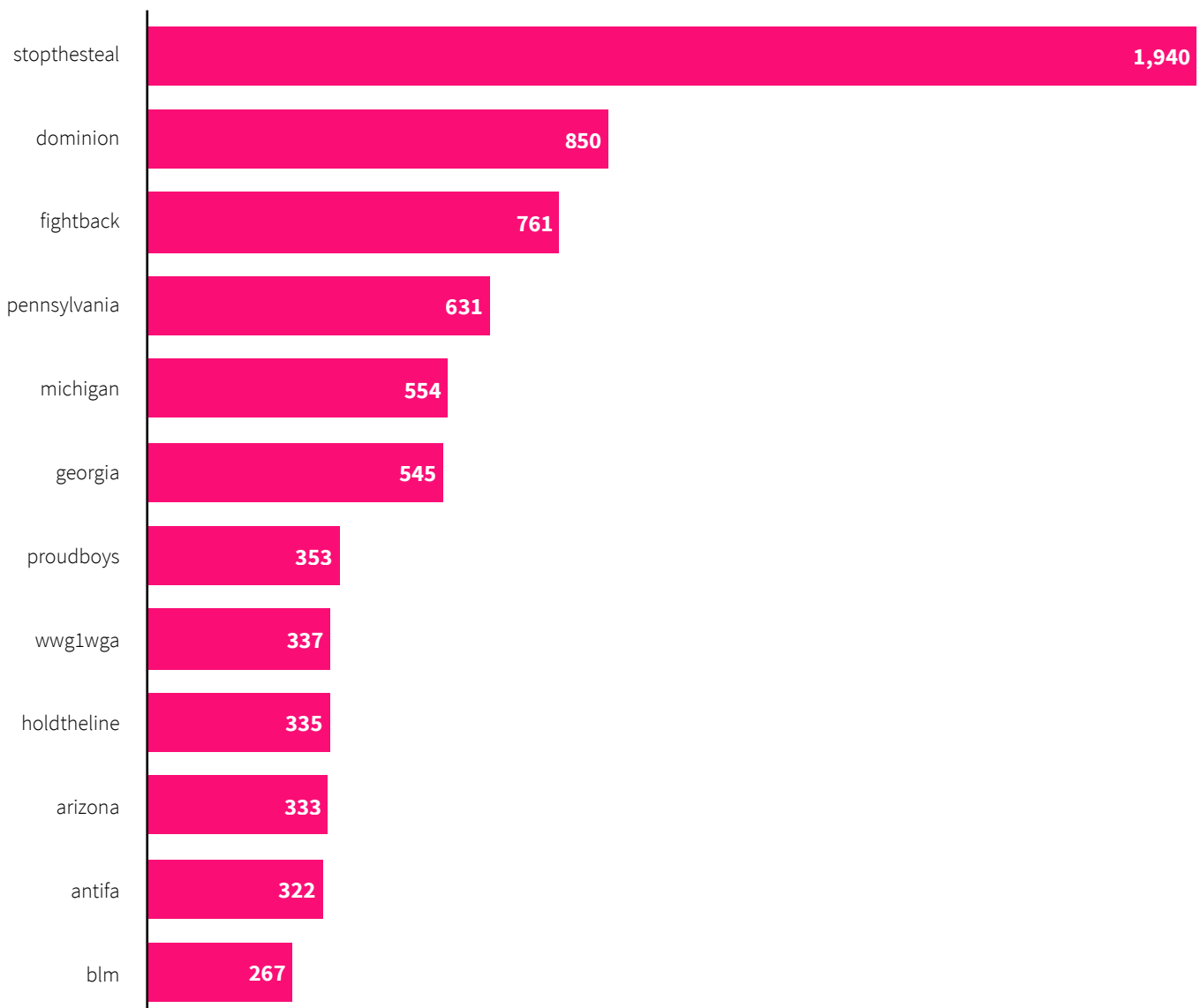
The mention of the Proud Boys in an official presidential debate not only provided an inroad for the group to become a household name, but also bolstered their legitimacy within the mainstream political system. The Proud Boys brand, as well as those of other militia and armed groups, became intrinsically tied to the President, with searches for armed-group merchandise and membership increasing during this period. This trend provides yet more evidence for the relationship between offline events and online activity, affirming the potential for President Trump's words and actions to mobilize violent actors during the election period.

Deep dive, "Million MAGA March" events: 14 November and 12 December

Once President-Elect Biden's win was declared by multiple media sources on 7 November, pro-Trump supporters and armed groups took to the streets of their respective capital cities and Washington, DC to protest. Monitoring of armed group and militia online activity indicated that many were quick to embrace Trump's unfounded narrative of widespread election fraud, double down on their fealty to him, and remain steadfast in their belief President Trump had won re-election. Now, their stated goal was to "stop the steal."

▽ *High frequency keywords used in combination with #millionmagamarch on Parler, 3-8 Dec*

| Keyword	Count
stopthesteal	1,940
dominion	850
fightback	761
pennsylvania	631
michigan	554
georgia	545
proudboys	353
wwg1wga	337
holdtheline	335
arizona	333
antifa	322
blm	267

The Million MAGA Marches represented an accumulation of recruitment efforts, willingness to mobilize offline, and violent action; each march—culminating in the 6 January siege—indicated a marked decrease in the actors' threshold to violence.

Analysis of the Proud Boys' Parler activity prior to the Million MAGA events showed a similar pattern of behavior. In advance of each march, the Proud Boys strategically motivated users with a combination of incitement and disinformation posts, usually posted in conjunction with daily calls to attend the event in question. Then, during the week of the event, incitement posts decreased and promotional posts increased.
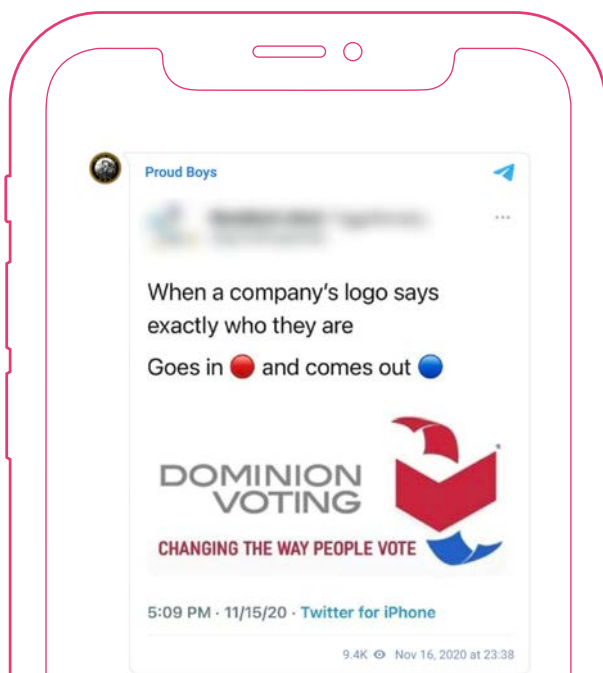
Screen grabs from the Proud Boys: Uncensored Telegram channel that highlight the disinformation and incitement (respectively) propagated on the platform.
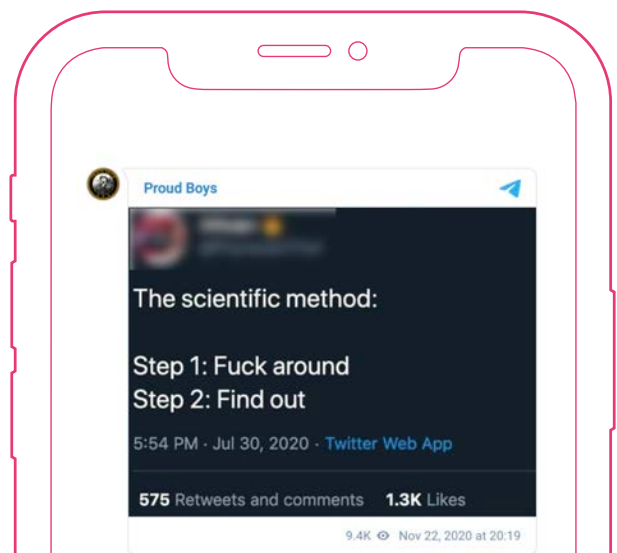
▽ *Coded breakdown of @TheProudBoys' parleys, 23 November - 7 December*
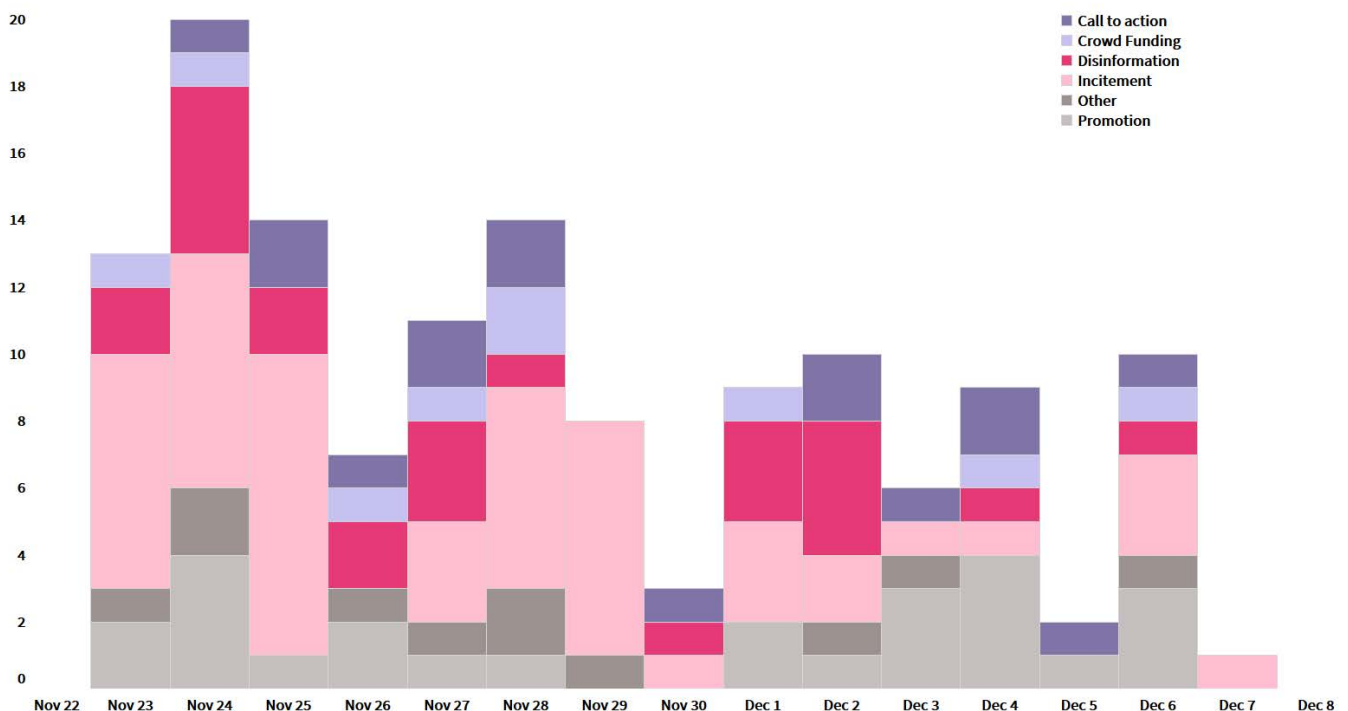
Promotion of the events were typically posted in tandem with advertisement to the Proud Boys' website and online merchandise store. This coincided with a distinctive peak in search interest for search terms such as "Proud Boys merchandise" during the weekend of the first "Million MAGA March" event.

▽ *Searches for "Proud Boys merchandise," 7 November - 21 November*
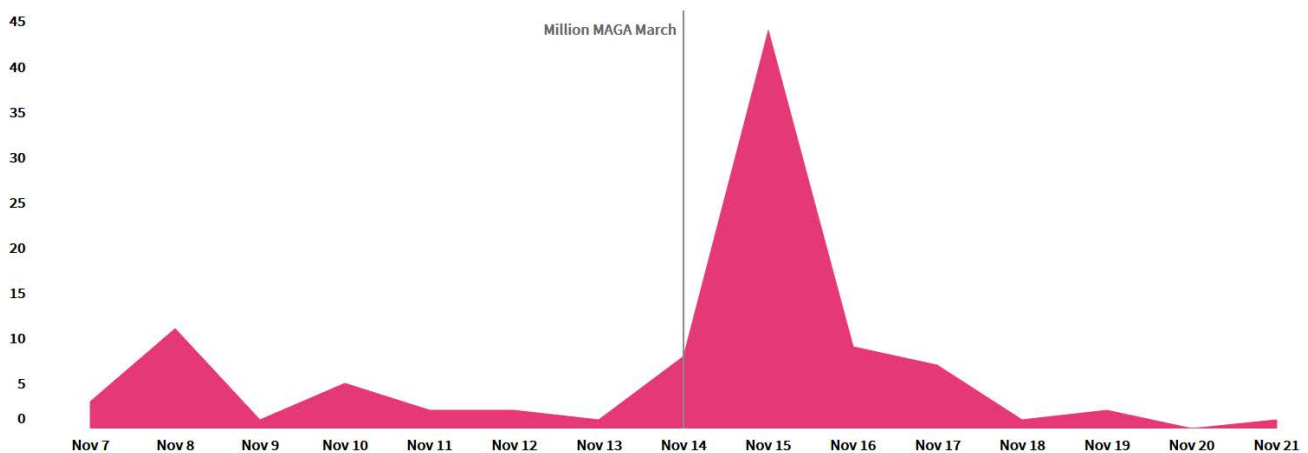

Election protests also functioned as key networking events for attendees and those interested in joining armed groups. Searches to join various armed groups reached their highest recorded levels during the MAGA marches.

▽ *Search indicators to join Three Percenters, Oath Keepers and Proud Boys by day*
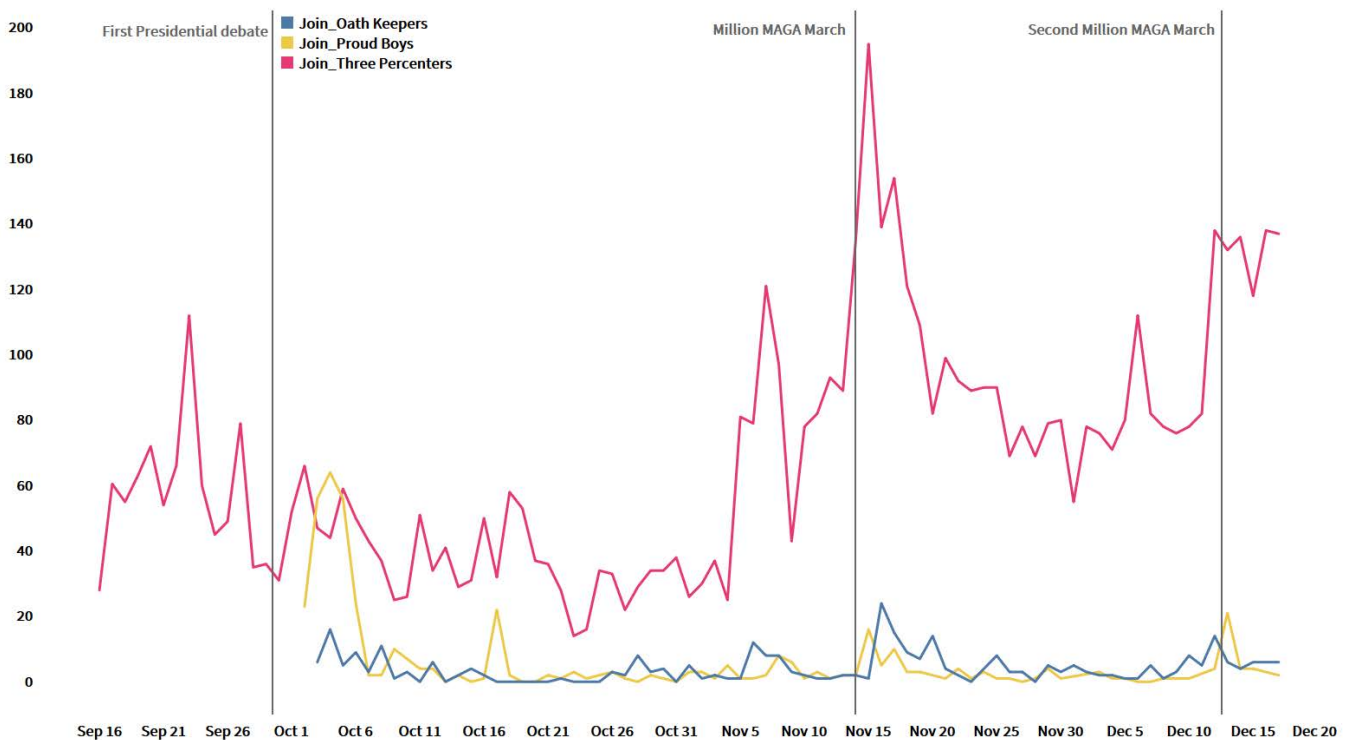
▽ *Searches to join Three Percenters pre- and post-Election Day*
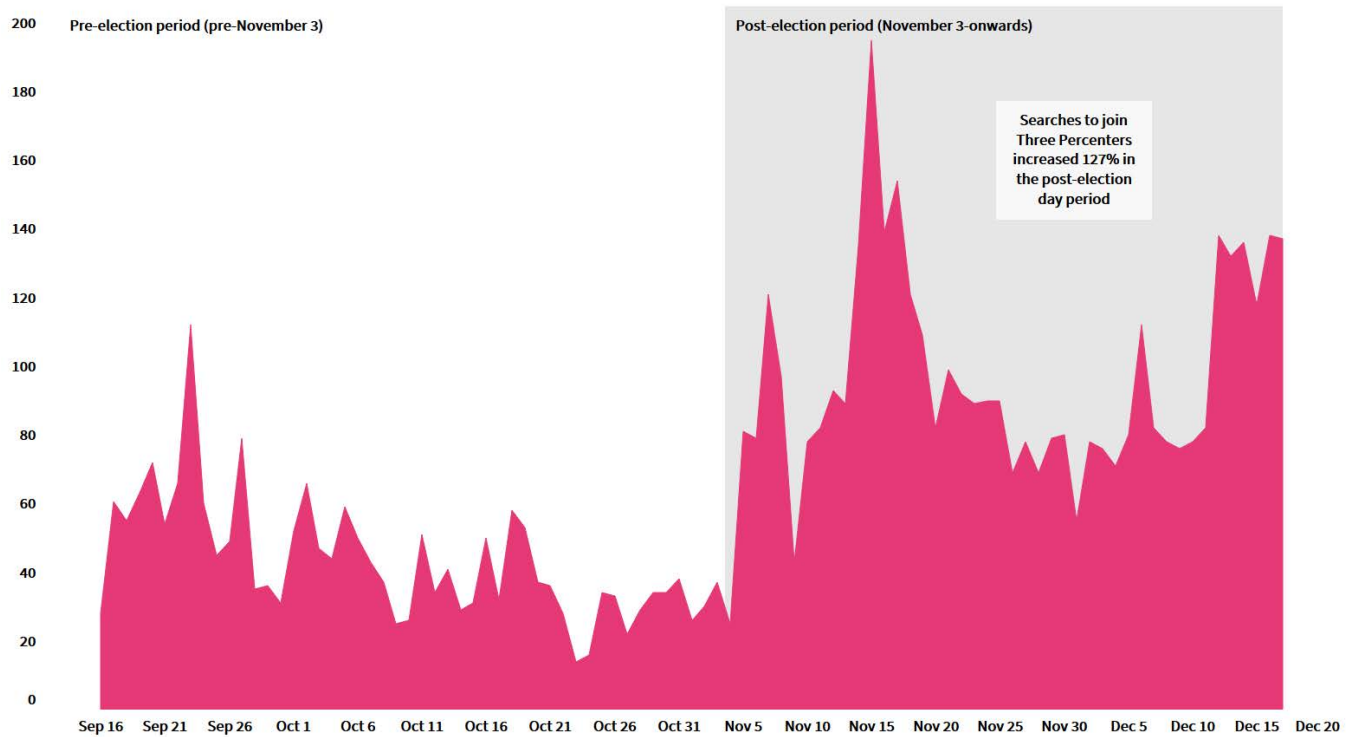
The two events have been proven to act as catalysts for future protests, coordinated misinformation campaigns and even targeted violence. Online monitoring of armed group rhetoric revealed that groups were initially wary at the November Million MAGA March that violence and violent rhetoric could damage the President's re-election efforts. This was clearly seen at the first march when Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrio audibly commanded a group of over 100 Proud Boys to stop chanting "Fuck antifa" as they were swarmed by media.

Certification of ballot recounts in swing states confirming Biden's victory and reports of the President's team enacting transition protocols generated chatter online that increased the likelihood of violence from armed groups following a concession from the President; for example, the Proud Boys Uncensored Telegram channel shared a video of a group shouting, "No Trump, No Peace!" Defying the official results, armed groups continued to plan protests into December, participate in event marketing and recruitment, and inveigh that a presidency perceived by Trump to be stolen would be met with violence.

As anticipated, the second Million MAGA March signalled a departure from previous hesitancy. Eight people were reportedly injured, of whom four were stabbed. There were a number of arrests for brawling throughout the event and into the night. When the march concluded, Proud Boys were recorded re-deploying in groups to look for Antifa activists that were, according to a Parler post, "running from us [Proud Boys] all night." Members were also recorded tearing down Black Lives Matter signs from historically Black churches near Freedom Plaza and setting them on fire.

This trajectory of violence has since culminated in the violent insurrection of the Capitol on 6 January. Armed groups continue to plan protests into the New Year, in particular the highly anticipated Inauguration Day armed "Million Militia March" in Washington, DC.

Thematic findings

Conspiracy theories

Key findings

▸ There were more than **35,000 searches** across the US for conspiracy theories.

▸ The most popular conspiracies were: QAnon (**24,044 searches**), FEMA camps (**8,271**), and election rigging (**3,115**).

▸ Elements of the QAnon community are steadfast that "the left" stole the presidency for Biden, despite the conspiracy losing its pre-election momentum. Their involvement in the **6 January** insurrection signals that belief in QAnon remains widespread, fervent and tied to President Trump.

▸ Search interest in FEMA-related conspiracies remained consistent. Their popularity is a prime example of how anti-government theories are leveraged by Americans who may not identify with violent sentiments expressed by the patriot movement, but are hostile to FEMA, other government agencies, or the policies of the Trump administration.

▸ The top 10 states (weighted by 100k population) were: **Oregon**, **Arizona**, **Washington**, **Illinois**, **California**, **Texas**, **Virginia**, **Pennsylvania**, **Florida** and **Idaho**.

▽ *Searches for conspiracy theory by day, 16 September to 17 December*
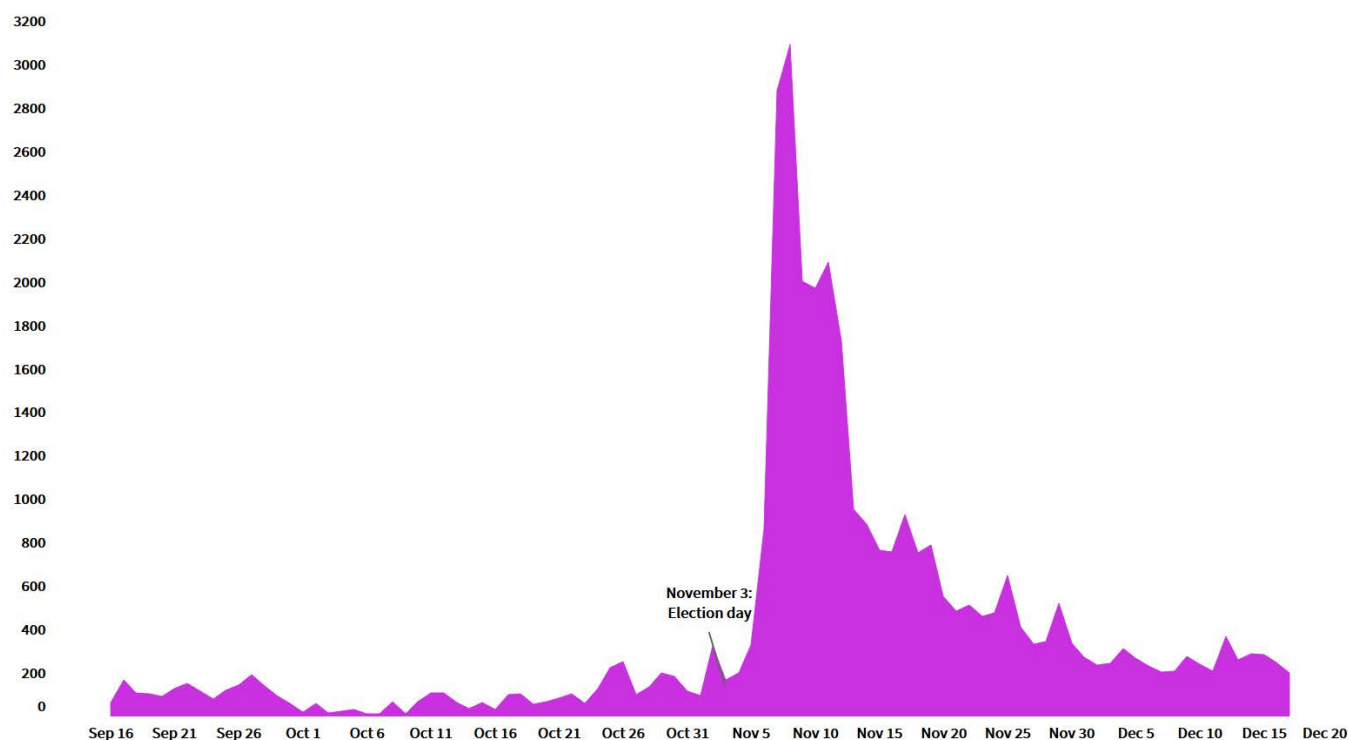
Widespread conspiratorial beliefs endangered democracy, mental health and public safety

Conspiracy theories are fueled by epistemic, existential and social factors. They tend to take hold during times that evoke uncertainty and anxiety. Conspiratorial beliefs can have a measurable impact on people's health, relationships and safety. Importantly, such beliefs are closely associated with intergroup dynamics, simultaneously bridging gaps and broadening divides. Especially within the highly polarized context of the 2020 US presidential election during the life-altering COVID-19 pandemic, it was not surprising to see an increase in conspiratorial beliefs. Swathes of internet users trying to make sense of the crises and events unfolding around them coalesced online around conspiracy theories ranging from FEMA camps to QAnon.

Devout beliefs in conspiracies rooted in junk news and disinformation combined with support for Trump's re-election has brought together conspiracy theorists, hate groups, white supremacist organizations, the alt-right and alt-lite, and armed groups at "Stop the Steal" protests. Among the individuals photographed storming the Capitol on 6 January were those donning Pepe the frog paraphernalia, carrying the "Kekistan" Flag, and wearing "Camp Auschwitz" sweatshirts. Internet culture and conspiracy theories have played a key role in the escalation of offline events – notably those marked with violence or the threat of violence – organized in response to the outcome of the US presidential election.

Deep dive: QAnon

Since its inception in 2017, QAnon has evolved from a fringe internet subculture to a mainstream talking point of US politics. Widespread support for the theory is exacerbated by its political endorsement from current and former congressional candidates, several of whom have expressed explicit support for the theory. QAnon membership in ten public Facebook groups reportedly grew from around 6,000 to around 40,000 members between March and July of 2020. Peaks and troughs in QAnon-related search data were mirrored in observed rises and falls in online support for Q among their followers.

President Trump has been a central fixture of the QAnon movement, depicted as a beacon of hope for supporters against the cabal of left-wing political elites. Trump's tacit endorsement of QAnon, particularly following an August 2020 press conference, only aggrandized his role in the narrative. The community viewed this election as a "good vs. evil" scenario; Trump's victory was considered paramount to the preservation of American values from the malicious, Democrat-supported "Deep State." QAnon users frequently reference the idea that Trump is "tied up by the evil dems" and the "constant battle to save this great country from evil."

Consequently, the QAnon community actively tracked the 2020 US presidential election online via a news aggregation site (see image above), with participants regularly speculating on the outcome and contributing memes and disinformation to the "2020 Meme War" to advance their political agenda. QAnon search activity drove the prominent search-per-day data spike after Election Day on 3 November, reaching its peak on 8 November (1,996 searches). However, this was followed by a week-on-week decline in QAnon-related search activity as excitement over the red mirage quickly dissipated and a Biden victory appeared more likely.

▽ *Searches for conspiracy theory by day, broken down into sub-theme.*
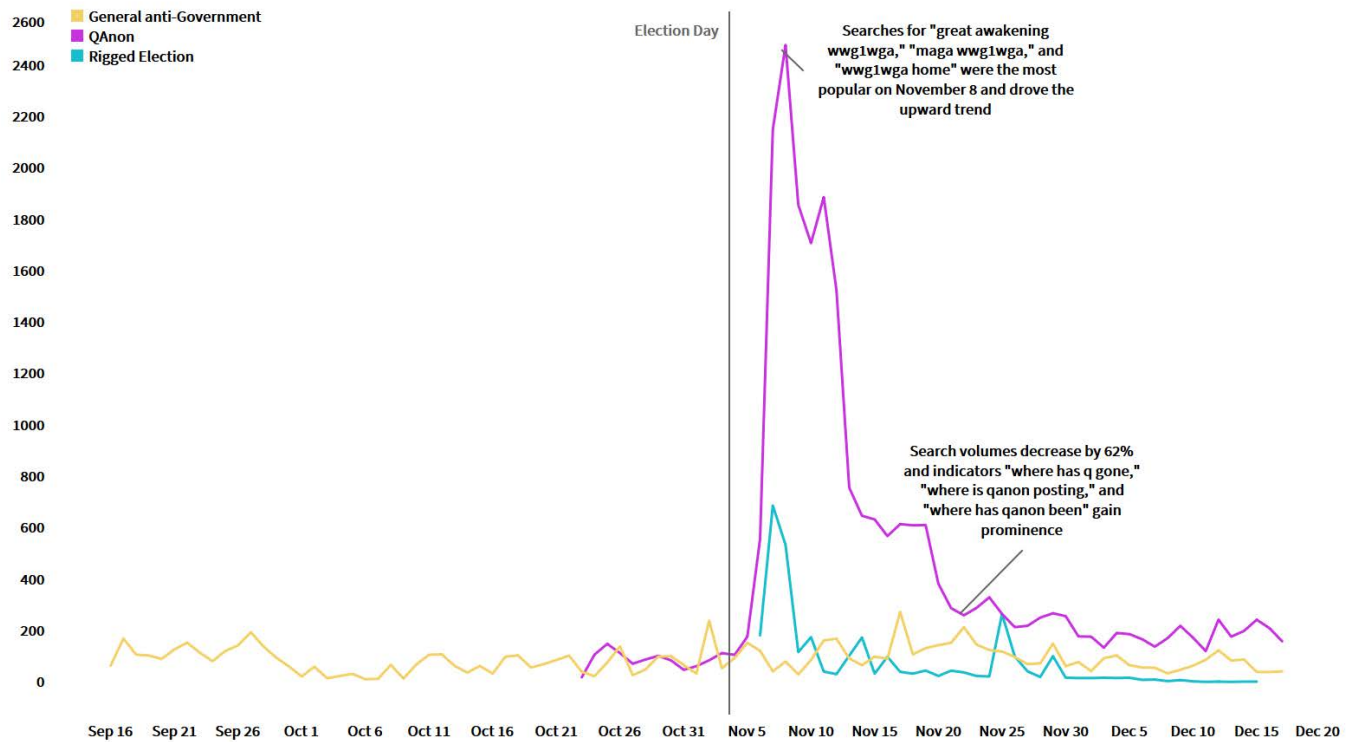
Early in the campaign cycle QAnon adherents anticipated ballot tampering, vote rigging and political violence on Election Day. However, the election outcome proved to be another example of Q's failed prophecies. Monitoring of QAnon activity on 8kun, 4chan and Gab revealed fervent discussions among Q-supporters who felt misled in the immediate aftermath of Election Day. Meanwhile, activity on the /qresearch/ board saw a steady drumbeat of dissent during the following week.
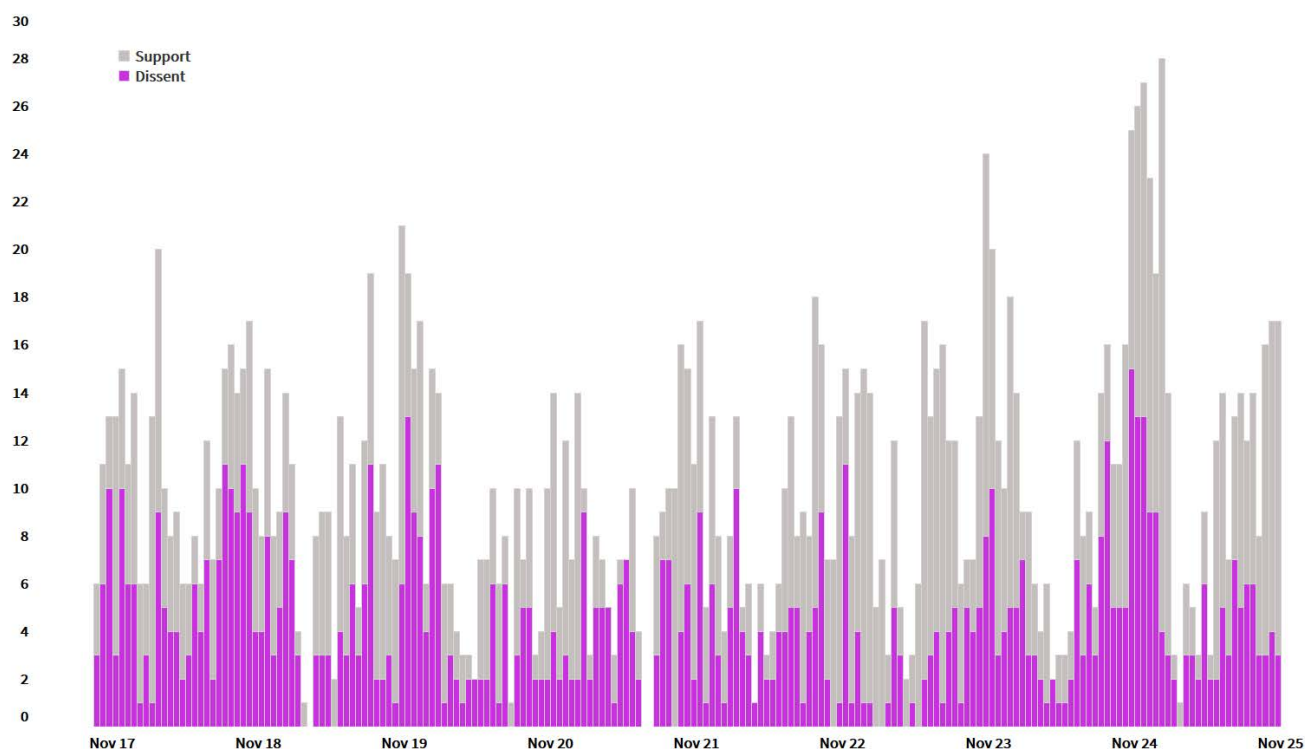
▽ *References to Q's failed prophecies on 8kun, 4chan, and Gab from 1 November to 10 November.*
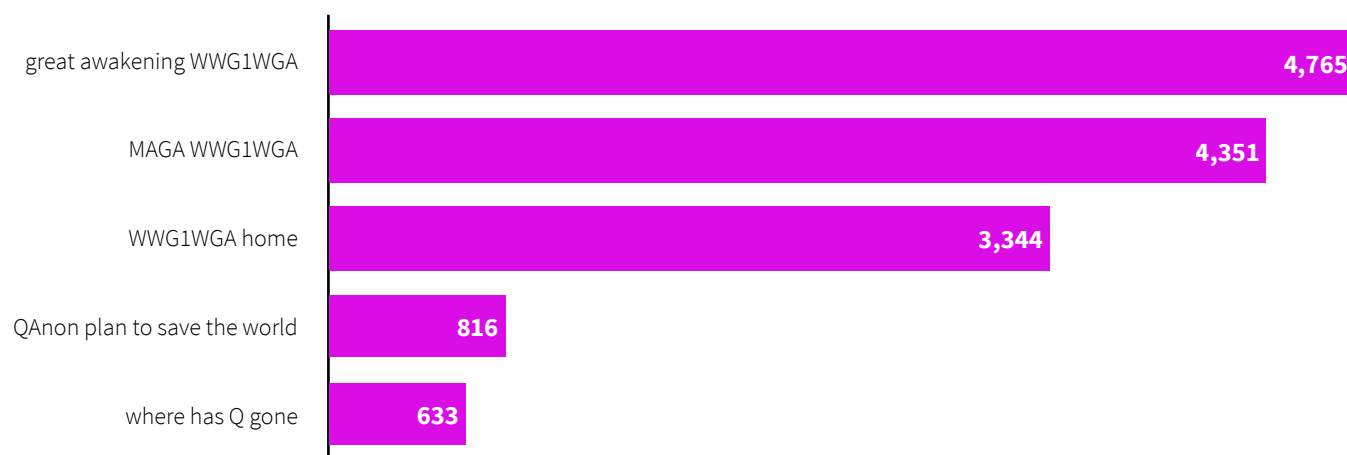*Keywords: Q AND (failed prophecy OR is a fake OR was wrong)*
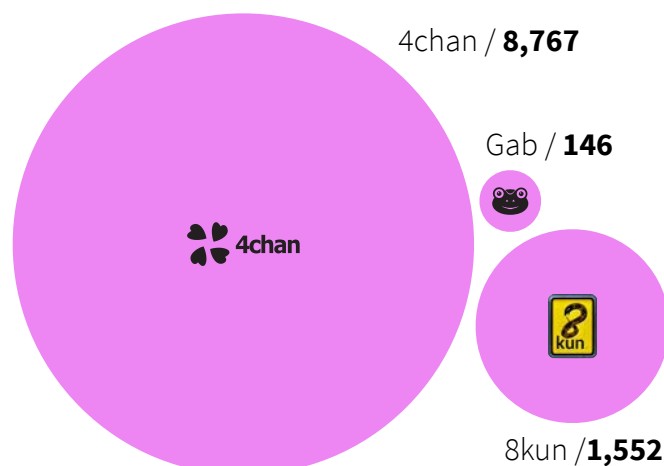
▽ *Posts on the /qresearch/ board from 17 November to 25 November, coded by messages of support or dissent*

The lack of QDrops or "intelligence" from Q following the election was met with frustration from the Q-community, who felt their leader had abandoned them at a critical juncture – a finding complemented by the sharp increase in search activity for "where has q gone" in the post-election period (3 November-onwards).

▽ *Top five QAnon-related keywords by search volume*

great awakening WWG1WGA	4,765
MAGA WWG1WGA	4,351
WWG1WGA home	3,344
QAnon plan to save the world	816
where has Q gone	633

Q broke their silence on 13 November 2020, ten days after their Election Day post (QDrop #4949). Users on 8kun and 4chan expressed their exhaustion with the mental gymnastics required to keep up with "the plan," imploring Q to "shit or get off the pot." Further silence from Q followed, lasting over three weeks, until QDrop #4953 on 8 December; searches on this day for "qanon plan to save the world" surged 145%. However, it was short lived, as overall search activity rapidly declined, returning to near pre-election levels.

▽ *Searches for QAnon, linked with dates of "QDrops"*
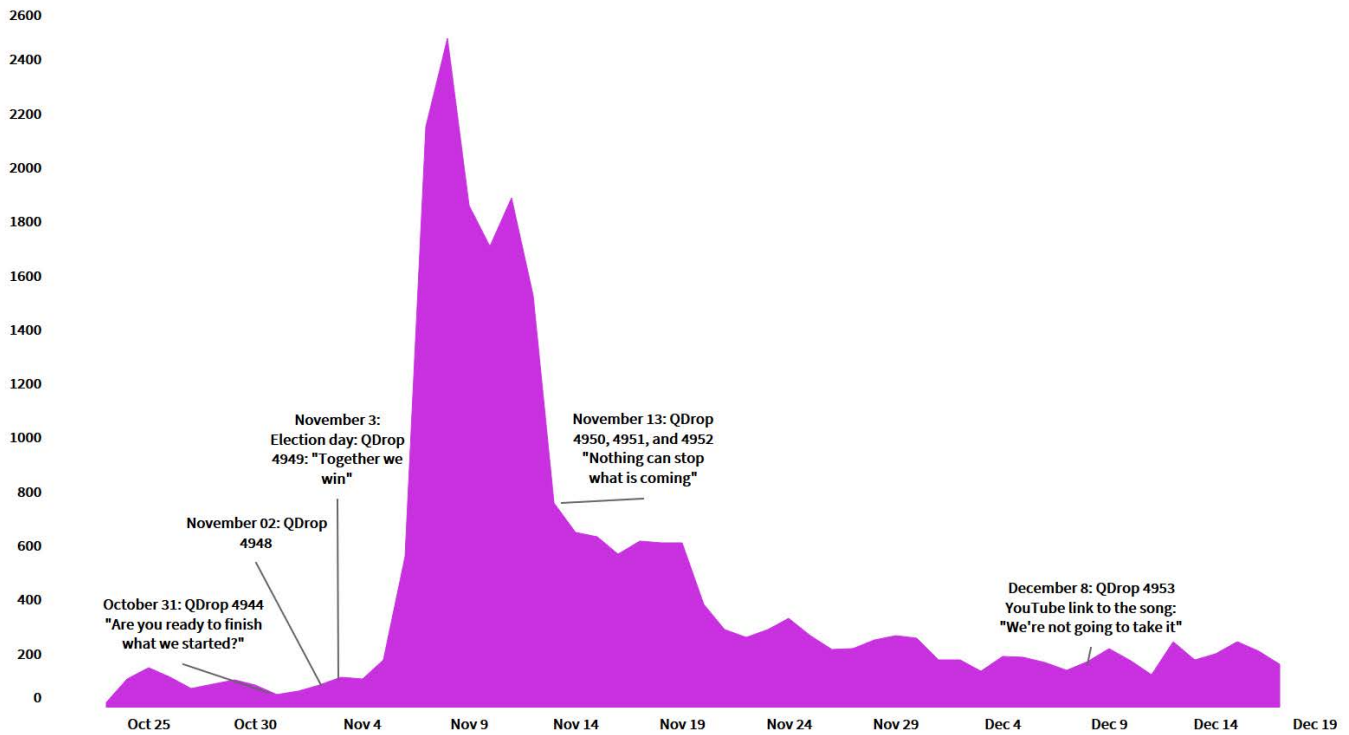
In spite of wavering faith in the power of Q, certain sections of the community are steadfast that the left stole the presidency for Biden. As it happens, QAnon supporters predicted a potential coup against Trump, as well as a plot by leftist militia groups to "siege the White House and take over major United States cities on Election Night." None of the predicted events have come to pass.

Analysis of QAnon activity on 8kun and 4chan indicates growing factionalism in the community between those vindicated by Q's broken silence and those exhausted by another false prediction. Many followers viewed Q's silence as an abdication. On the /qresearch/ board, believers have turned on Q, calling them "a psychotic piece of shit with confessed god damned mental problems and he's done fuck all to redeem himself." For some, Biden's victory appears to have broken the QAnon spell, as they are now forced to reckon with the time, energy, and friends and family they have lost as a result of the conspiracy. Q boards indicate that many users' mental health is fraying, and include expressions of extreme anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

While the community appears to be losing some of its pre-election momentum, the 6 January insurrection signalled that continued belief in QAnon remains widespread, fervent and underlined tethered to Trump.
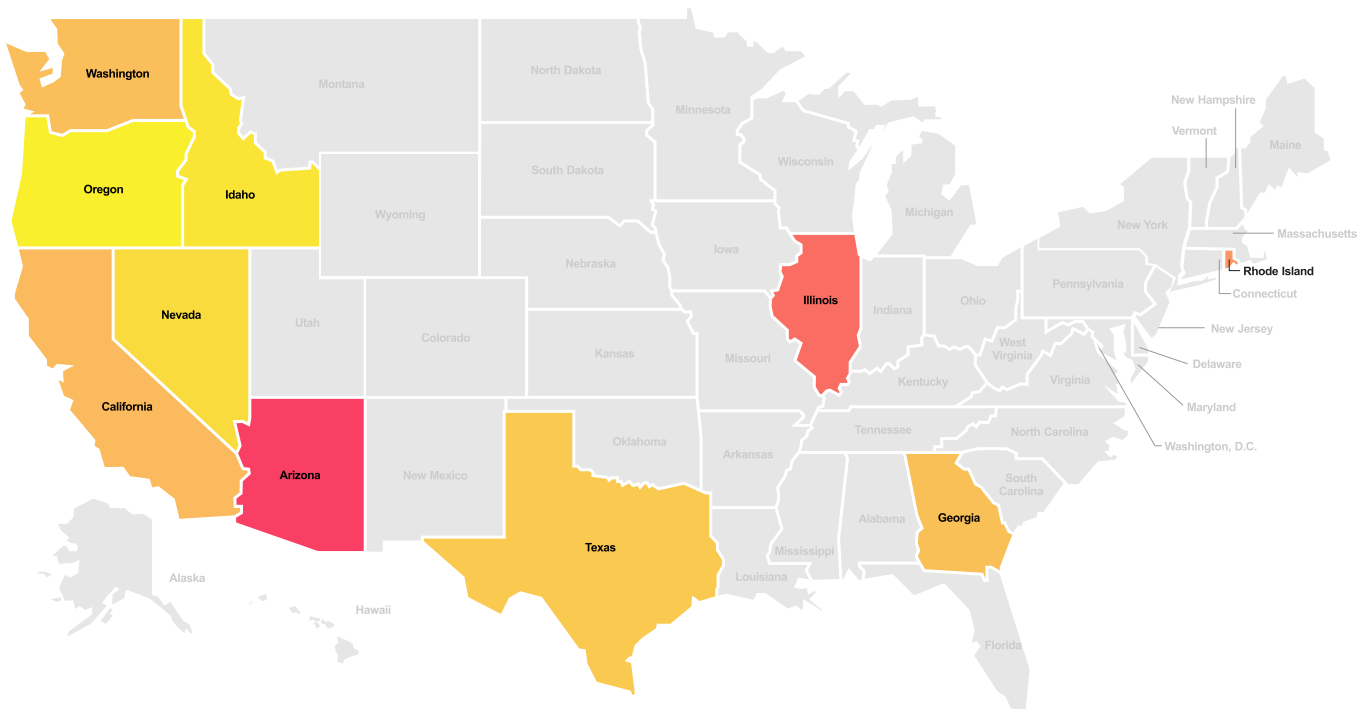
Deep dive: FEMA concentration camps

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the focal point of several decades-old anti-government conspiracy theories that primarily revolve around perceived threats to the lives and liberty of American citizens. Conspirators allege that the federal government is planning to incarcerate "patriots" in FEMA-run concentration camps, and that FEMA will force Americans to surrender their privately-owned guns and exert control over the civilian population on behalf of the New World Order, the Illuminati, Jews, or unspecified elites.

Search interest for FEMA conspiracy-related indicators was steady throughout the reporting cycle, increasing 25% during the post-election period (3 November-onwards). Per capita searches were highest in Arizona, followed by Illinois and Rhode Island.

▽ *Top 10 states for FEMA-related indicators according to searches per 100,000 residents*
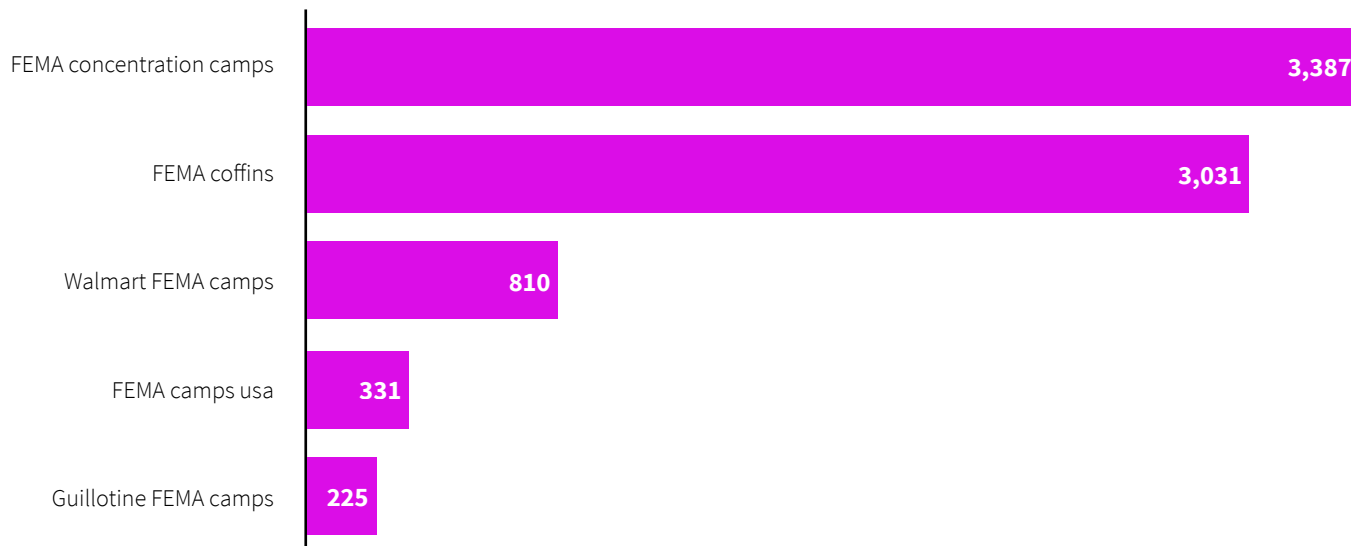

The term "FEMA concentration camps" is also used by individuals to express generalized fear and distrust of the US government. Allegations range from President Obama stockpiling thousands of plastic coffins to the conversion of abandoned Walmart sites into camps for the detention of immigrants and homeless people. A video from Portland uploaded in April 2020 claimed that COVID-19 was being used as a pretext for FEMA to imprison the homeless and separate "whites, blacks and gays."

In September 2020, a member of the Ohio House of Representatives, Nino Vitale, endorsed the conspiracy on his verified Facebook account. Referring to government-enforced COVID-19 quarantines, he stated: "Now we learn WHERE they are going to take children when they remove them from your home: FEMA Concentration Camps, set up right here in Ohio." His post received over 1,600 comments and 5,300 shares.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine attempted to debunk this conspiracy at a press briefing a few days later, calling the FEMA conspiracy "ridiculous." However, YouTuber comments on a local news channel's recording seemed undeterred and included: "Damage controle (sic) but it doesn't work. We all know (sic) this for years," and "Us smart ones know what Fema camps are and we can't stand to be lied to!! You demons need to tell the truth! Covid isn't even real and you wanna quarantine people."

▽ *Top 5 FEMA-related keywords by search volume*

Keyword	Search Volume
FEMA concentration camps	3,387
FEMA coffins	3,031
Walmart FEMA camps	810
FEMA camps usa	331
Guillotine FEMA camps	225

The FEMA camps conspiracy is a prime example of how amorphous, conspiratorial anti-government sentiment can manifest and sustain itself online. It appears especially palatable to individuals and groups that are hostile to FEMA, other government agencies, or the policies of the Trump administration, but who may not identify with the more extreme anti-government sentiments expressed by the broader patriot movement.

Thematic findings

Political violence
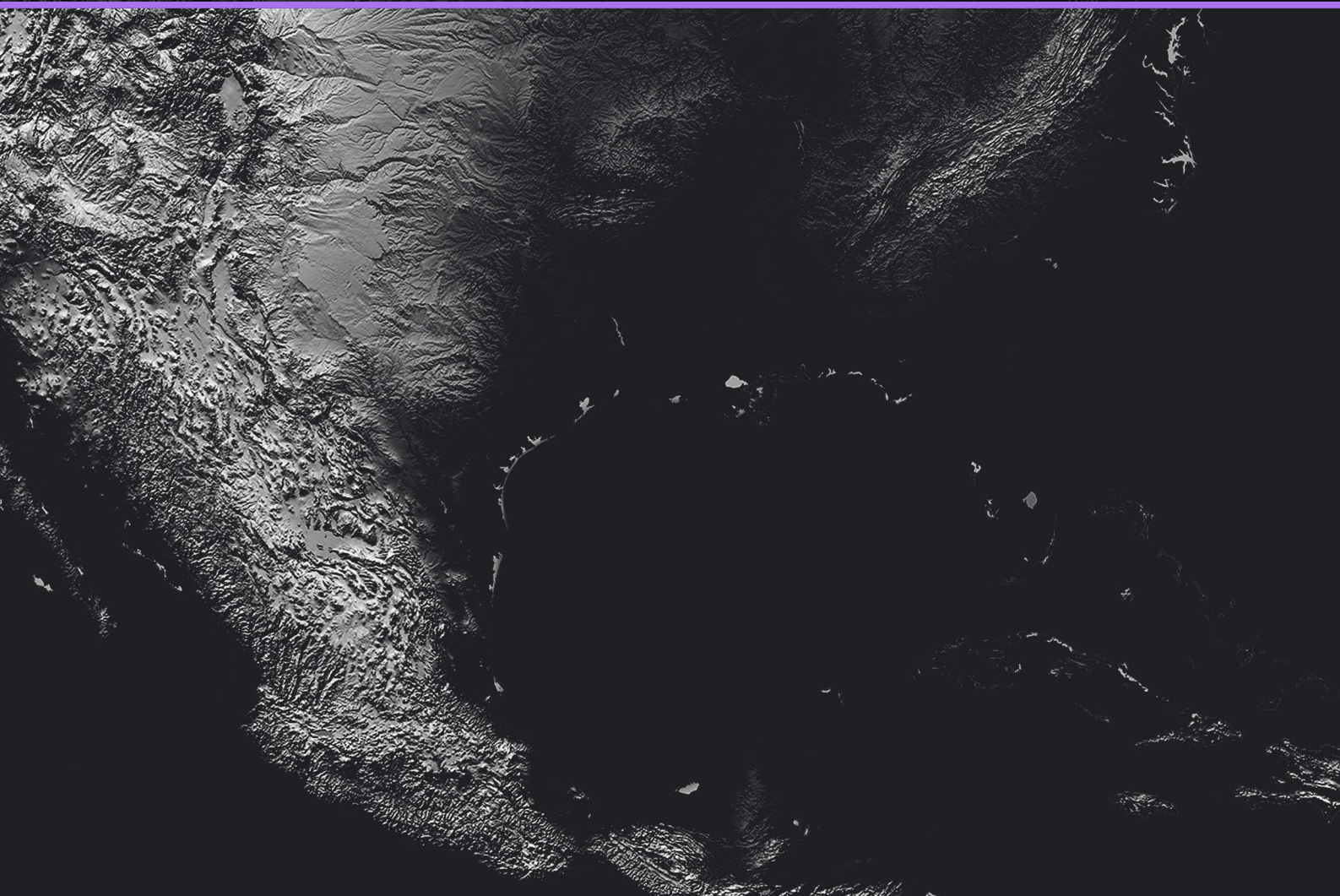
Key findings

▸ There were almost **1,500 searches** across the US expressing an interest in political violence.

▸ Violent searches were primarily directed towards "Democrats" (**451 searches**), Mitch McConnell (**361**), and Donald Trump (**196**).

▸ While partisanship and political violence have long been part of the American political system, these two phenomena have surged into the mainstream during this presidential election cycle and related search traffic is on the rise.

▸ The top 10 states (weighted by 100k population) were: **Montana**, **Maine**, **Oregon**, **Delaware**, **Washington**, **Colorado**, **West Virginia**, **Maryland**, **Massachusetts** and **Virginia**.

▽ *Searches for political violence by day, 16 September to 17 December*
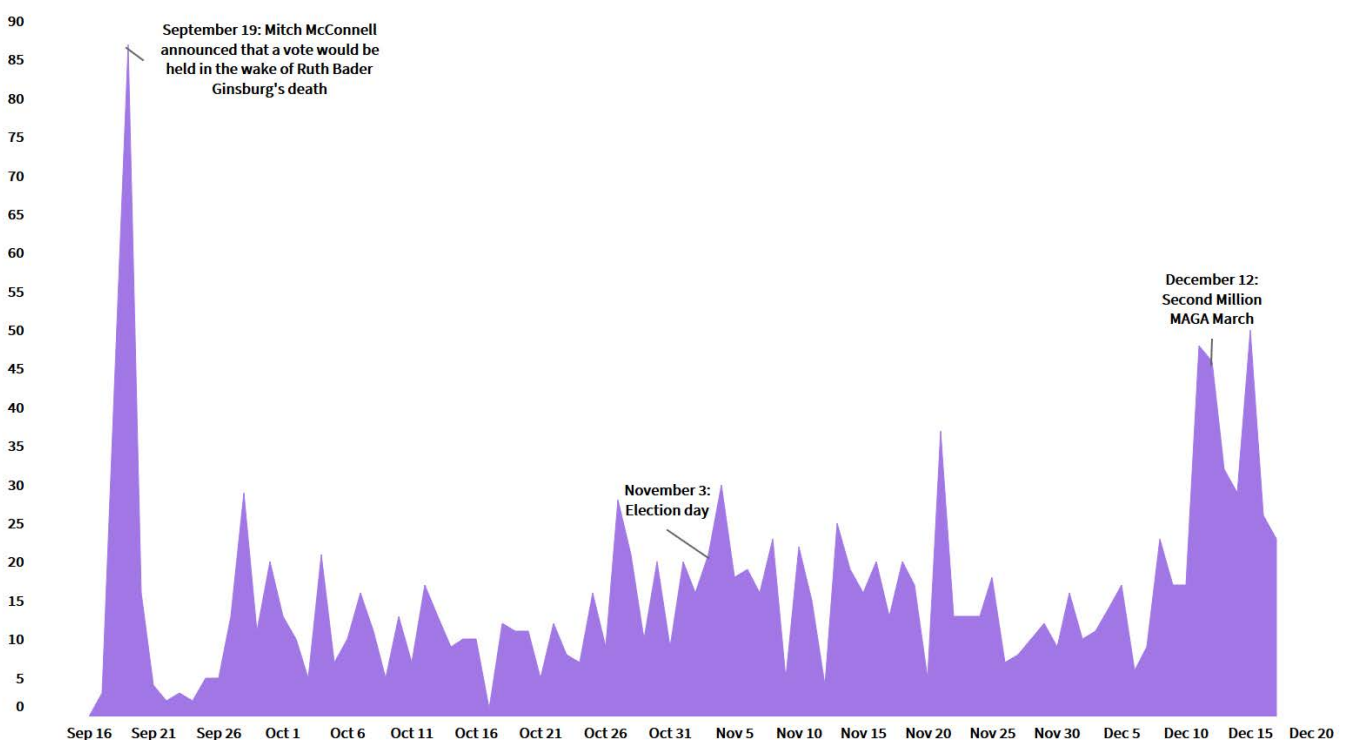
Rampant left/right polarization fueled plots of murder, rape and kidnap – and Kenosha

Moonshot safeguarded searches related to political violence directed towards almost 1,000 individuals including, but not limited to: both presidential and vice presidential candidates (Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump and Mike Pence), sitting senators (such as Ted Cruz and Lindsey Graham), Supreme Court justices and then-nominees (such as Amy Coney Barrett), sitting governors (such as Gretchen Whitmer), city mayors (such as Bill de Blasio), and journalists/pundits (such as Fox's Ted Williams and CNN's Jim Acosta), among others. The indicators covered a range of serious and violent harm variations, for example "how to kill" and "hang for treason."

Threats of violence, including murder, rape, kidnapping and other dangers faced by public figures have risen significantly in recent years. This has been linked to increased access to the internet and the growth of social media, closing the gap between public figures and the general public, and the normalization of violent threats online, both by anonymous users and prominent individuals who leverage social networks to support political violence. The presidential election of 2020 and surrounding events were no exception.

Moonshot found that internet search results were often dependent upon offline developments. For example, threats of violence toward Mitch McConnell in September rose dramatically after McConnell announced that a vote would be held to replace the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg several weeks before the election. According to Moonshot analysts, violent gendered abuse targeting female candidates for the open seat in the Supreme Court, namely Amy Coney Barnett, Allison Jones Rushing and Barbara Lagoa, substantially increased in the wake of their announcement unfolding on 4chan and Telegram. The most prominent trend was a memetic mimicking of the rape accusations made during Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh's hearing in 2018. Also during the reporting period, we watched online threats escalate to violent plots. Armed groups and militias have targeted Democratic governors over COVID-19 restrictions and gun control, which resulted in a disrupted kidnapping plot of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer as well as clashes at COVID-19 and BLM protests.

The affordances granted by social media such as the use of pseudonyms or anonymity, the plausible deniability provided by memes and jokes, and the nature of the attention economy all combine to create a polluted information ecosystem where threats of violence are commonplace and often consequence-free. The increasing political polarization gripping US politics – especially in a year marked by crisis, tragedy, and rampant disinformation – is driving the frequency and diversity of these threats.

▽ *Top 5 political violence targets by search volume*

| Target	Search volume
Democrats	451
McConnell	361
Trump	196
Republicans	159
Biden	128
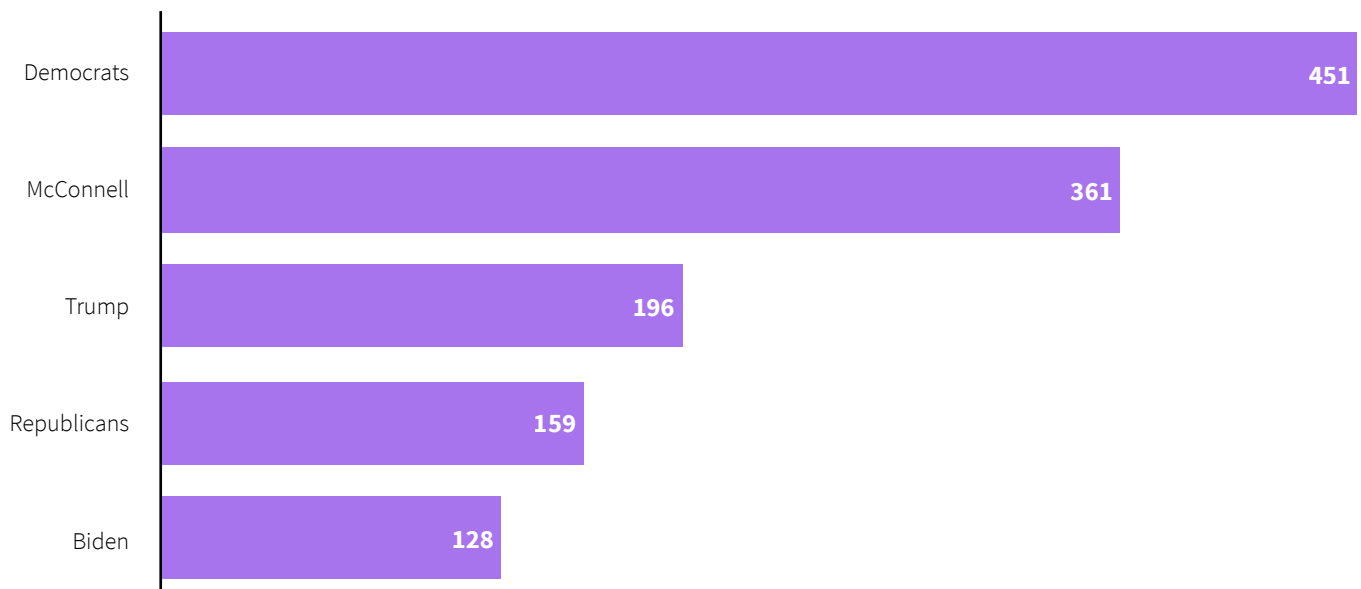
Deep Dive: Polarization between Democratic and Republican supporters

As the election campaign progressed toward 3 November, threats of violence within the campaigns became less individual in nature. Threats began targeting partisan groups, the media and democracy in general as voters became further divided by election-related events and the outcome, manifesting in the deadly attack on the Capitol on 6 January.

▽ *Searches related to political violence against "Democrats" and "Republicans" by day, 9 October to 17 December*
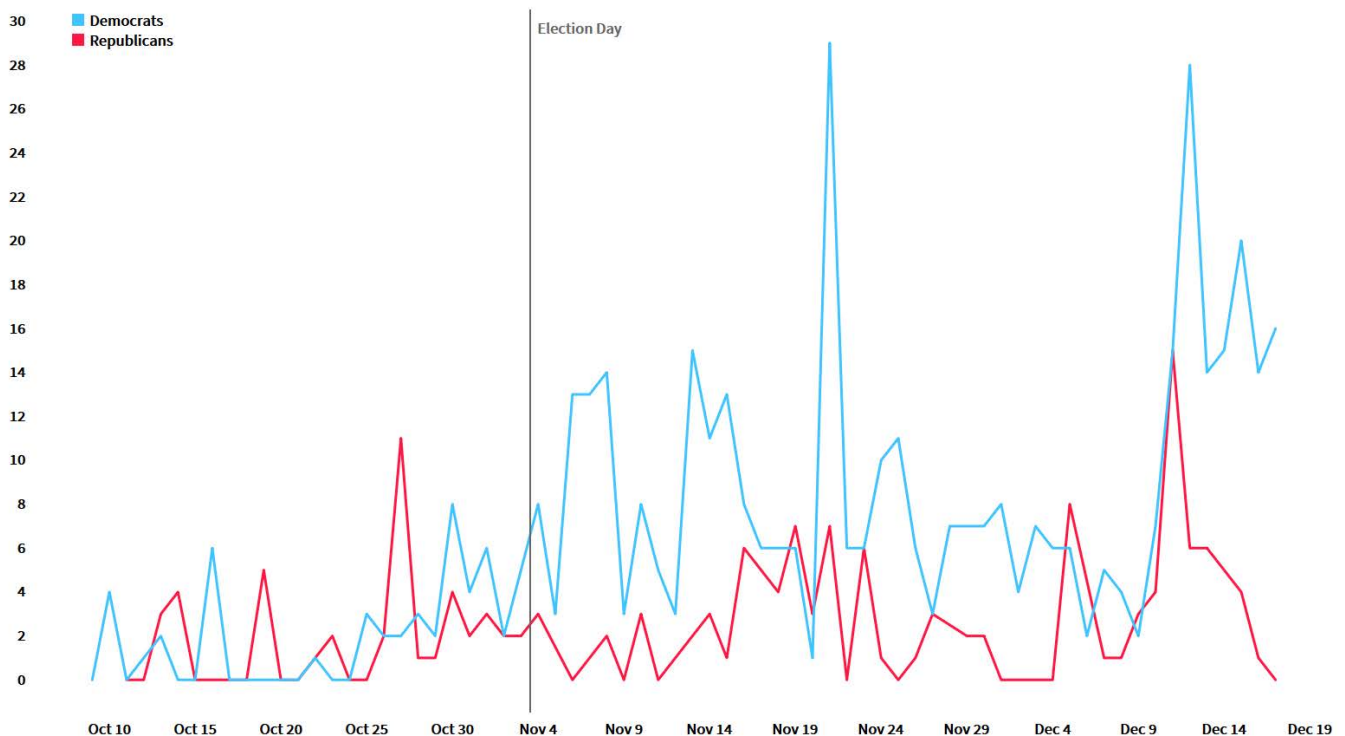
In the lead up to the 2020 election, Moonshot analysts found that those on the political right often accused those on the political left of being mentally ill and/or pedophilic. With the surge of QAnon supporters throughout 2020 and continued support for President Trump even in the wake of his electoral defeat, liberals and those on the left began adopting similar language to describe the right, with a comparable emphasis on mental illness. Both sides also accused one another of spreading disinformation ("fake news") as well as being intolerant, "unhinged," and violent. Threats indicate intense polarization between the political right and left, signaled by comments such as, "The lefts [sic] days are numbered" and "When the civil war breaks I'm ready to wipe out an entire side of politics."

A YouTube comment on a video alleging the Democratic Party had a plan to replace then-candidate Joe Biden as the nominee with Vice President Kamala Harris, in the event of a Biden-Harris campaign victory.

Multiple clashes have erupted between right- and left-wing protesters, especially at Black Lives Matter demonstrations throughout the summer of 2020. Perhaps most notably, then-17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse allegedly murdered two protesters and injured another at a BLM protest in Kenosha, WI. Rittenhouse claimed to answer the call from Kenosha Guard militia leader, Kevin Matthewson, to "take up arms to defend out [sic] City tonight from the evil thugs," referring to those protesting the local police shooting of Jacob Blake.

The Proud Boys held an "End Domestic Terrorism" rally in Portland in September 2020 – originally established to promote the idea that anti-fascists should be classified as a domestic terrorist organization – to support the exoneration of Rittenhouse. In advance of the rally, Gab users issued threats against "ANTIFA BLM," specifically that protest and counter-protest attendees will "END [THEM] if certain lines are crossed […] They will have lethal force. Your cold morgue box awaits, then hell." On Parler, users shared incitements to violence including comments such as "have your guns cocked and ready fellows," as well as images of "Antifa Hunting Permits" and weapons. The hashtags used alongside #freekyle in tweets suggest that users were invoking his influence in part to mobilize offline: #redemption, #fightback, #fearless and #teamwork. The use of Rittenhouse as a symbol of right-wing violence against left-wing protesters serves as a prime example of the extreme polarization that exists in the US.

▼ *Word Cloud of popular hashtags used alongside "#freekyle" tweets between 26 August and 27 September*

Journalists and members of the media have also fallen victim to polarized and politically motivated threats. Lack of trust in American media transcends the Trump presidency: however, Trump's "fake news" campaign has played a significant role in transforming a healthy skepticism of journalism into a rampant, dangerous rejection of traditional outlets, authorities and institutions. Americans are sharply divided along partisan lines when it comes to political and election-related news, thereby polarizing the public's media consumption. This convergence of media distrust among the general public, with the far-right's well-established criticism of the "fake news media," further perpetuated the violence seen against journalists on 6 January by the highly polarized context of the 2020 US presidential election.

In the months leading up to 6 January, leaked Oath Keepers' Rocketchat messages revealed discussions of "killing news media on air." Related, but much less explicit, was the suggestion from Grandmaster Jay of the Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC) that the NFAC should gain media attention by encircling the CNN building and that "what happens next is up to them." Members of the news media who were reporting from the streets and squares of Washington, DC on 6 January were threatened and surrounded, violent protesters smashed equipment and punched a photographer, and colleagues inside the Capitol were forced to shelter in secure locations; "murder the media" was later found scratched into a door of the Capitol.

The ideological polarization evident both online and offline has increased in scope and intensity under Trump's presidency. While partisanship and political violence have long been part of the American political system, these two phenomena have surged into the mainstream and are on the rise. From the Charleston church attack in 2015, to the Tree of Life synagogue and Capital Gazette shootings in 2018, to the El Paso and Dayton shootings in 2019, to the spate of clashes at protests and rallies throughout 2020 and into 2021, violence driven by political beliefs has become a mainstay in the US public consciousness.

Thematic findings

Targeted violence
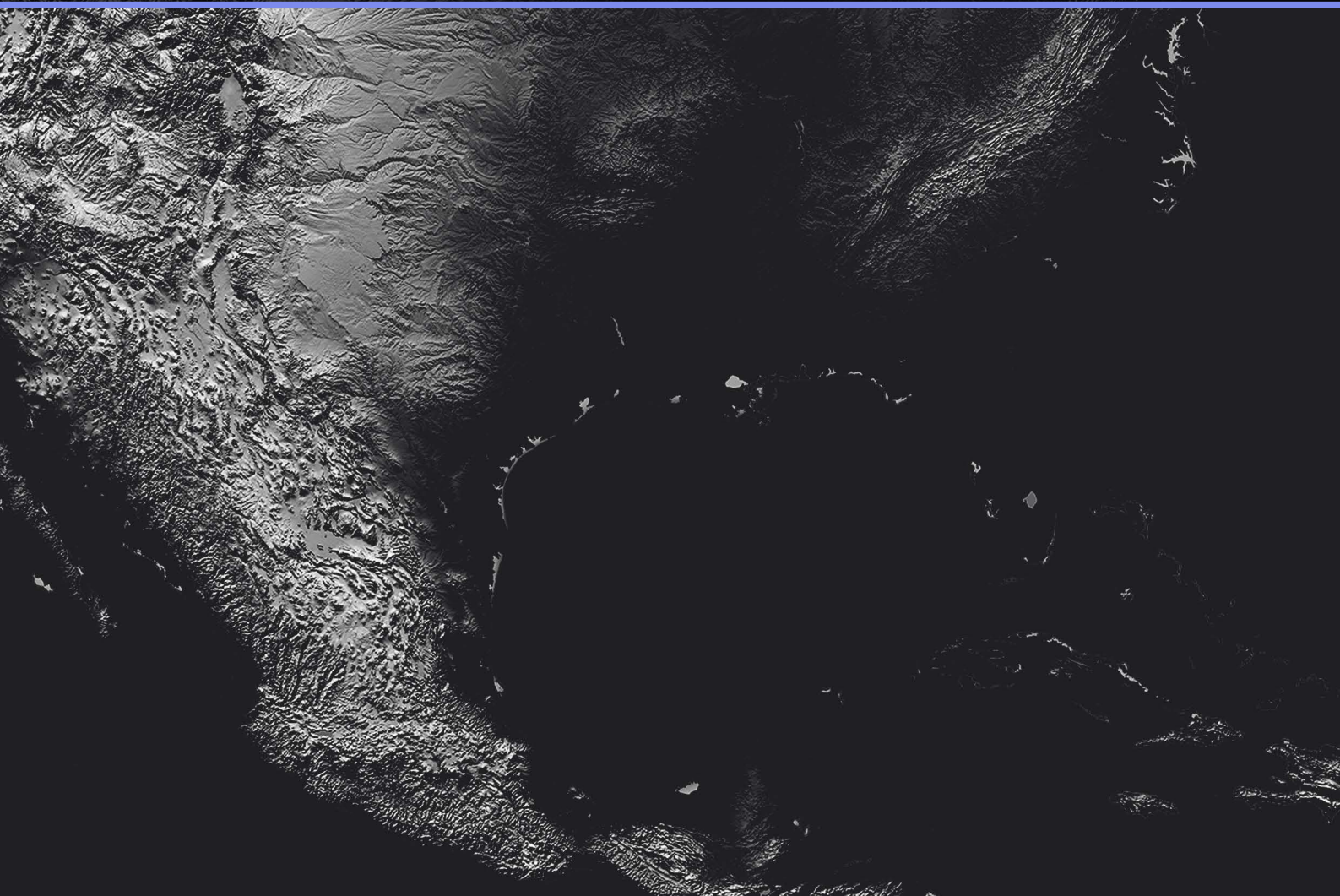
Key findings

▸ There were more than **7,000 searches** across the US for targeted violence.

▸ Threats of targeted violence are prominent both in the polluted online ecosystem and violent on the ground activity, which were equally apparent during the **6 January** insurrection.

▸ Search activity concentrated on the Anarchist Cookbook (**5,379 searches**), instructions on how to build explosives, such as C4 (**1,257**), and the Unabomber's manifesto (**768**).

▸ The top 10 states (weighted by 100k population) were: **Kansas**, **Arizona**, **Illinois**, **California**, **Washington**, **Oregon**, **Texas**, **Virginia**, **Ohio** and **Minnesota**.

▽ *Searches for targeted violence by day, 16 September to 17 December*
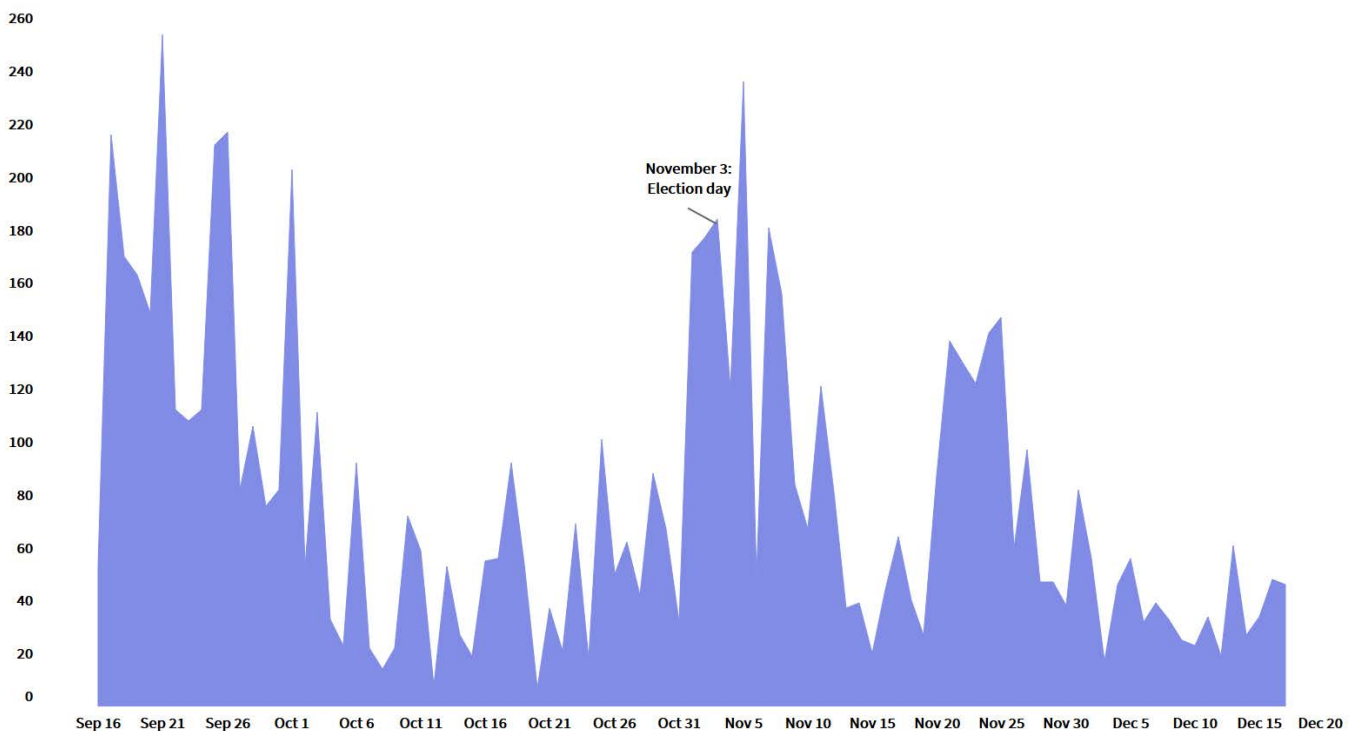
▽ *Searches for targeted violence in the top 2 states by per capita searches, Arizona and Kansas.*
  Searches in the pre-and post election periods show a surge in activity just before Election Day.
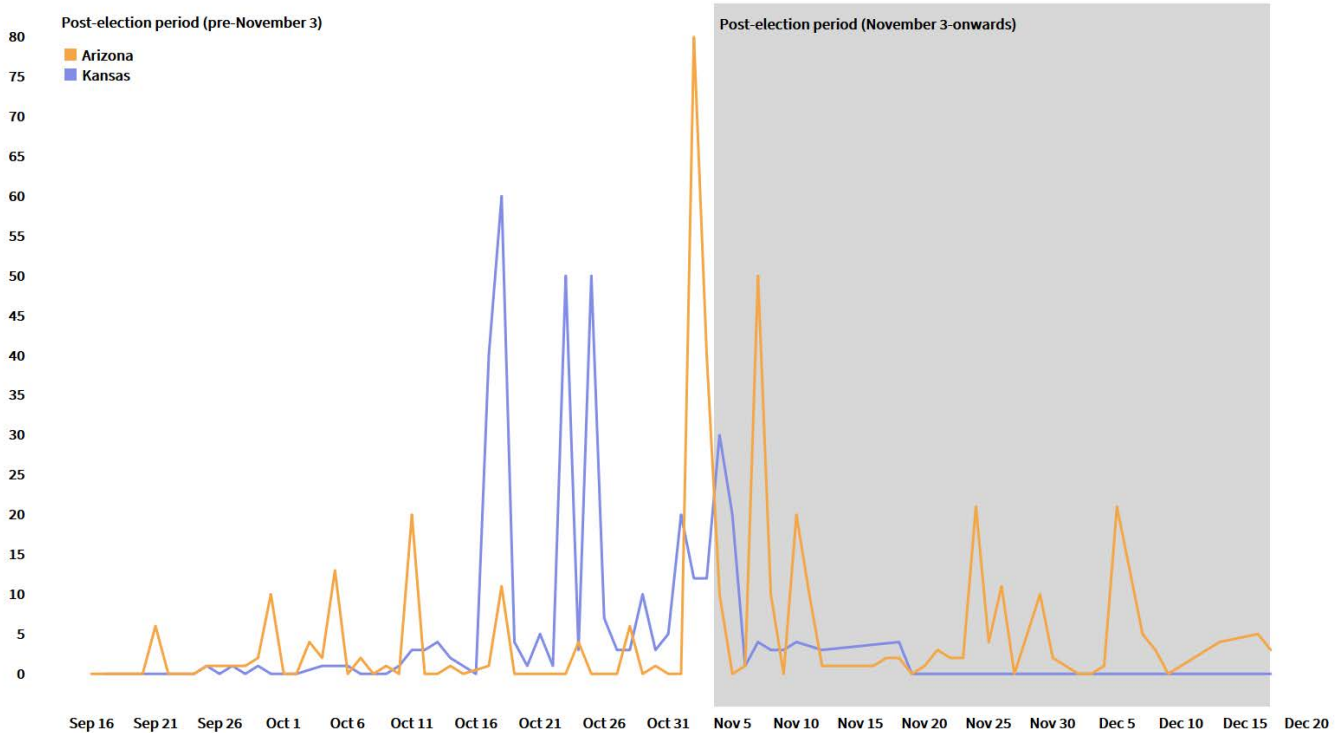
Inspired by white supremacist literature, people researched how to make explosives at home

The previous section assessed *who* was being targeted in the online environment. This section analyzes *how* individuals and groups might have made plans to commit acts of violence more broadly. The siege of the Capitol on 6 January conveys the importance of tracking such online search trends in two key ways.

First, Molotov cocktails and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were both found in the Capitol building during and after its takeover. While none of the devices in question were deployed effectively, they represent the potential transmission of internet activity into tangible violence; the devices found were reportedly built using homemade napalm.

Search activity for instructional advice on how to make explosives, including Molotov cocktails and napalm, reached their highest recorded levels during the week preceding and following Election Day:

▽ *Searches for "how to make a molotov cocktail," "how to make C4," "how to make homemade explosives," and "how to make napalm", 27 October to 10 November*
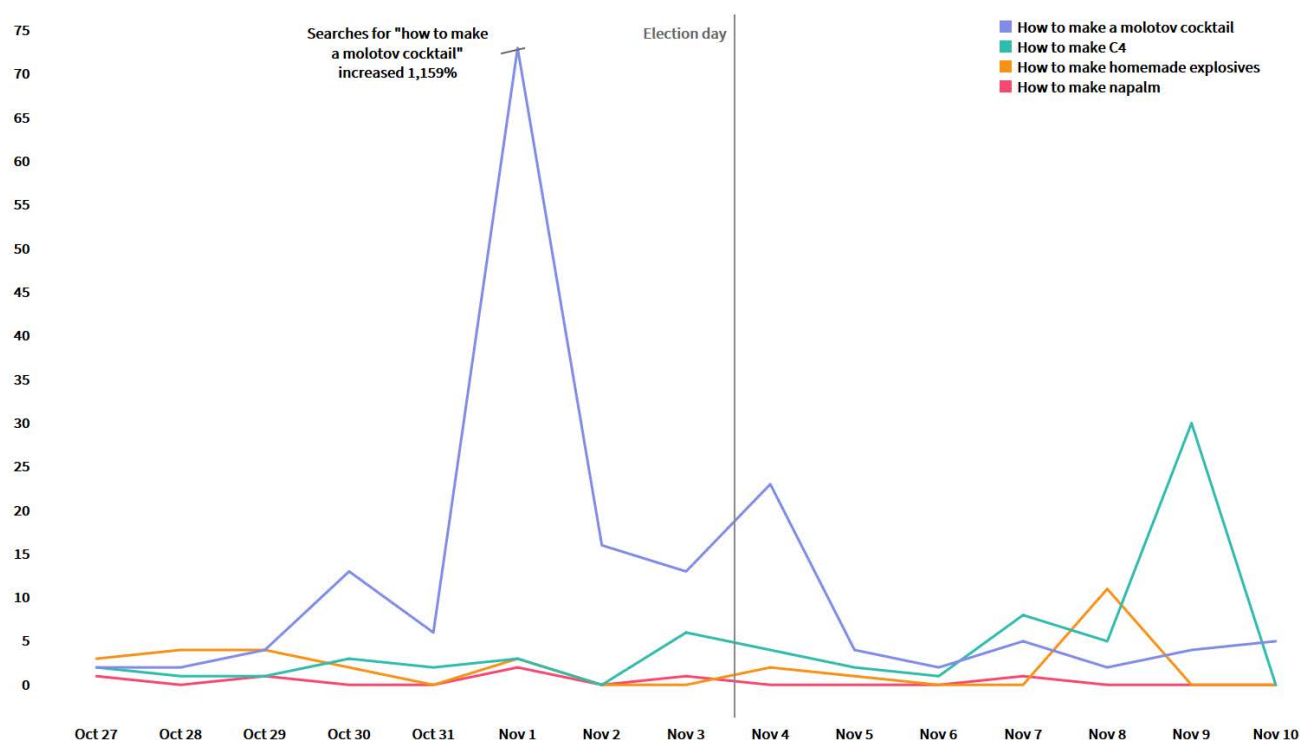
▽ *Top 5 explosive-related keywords by search volume*

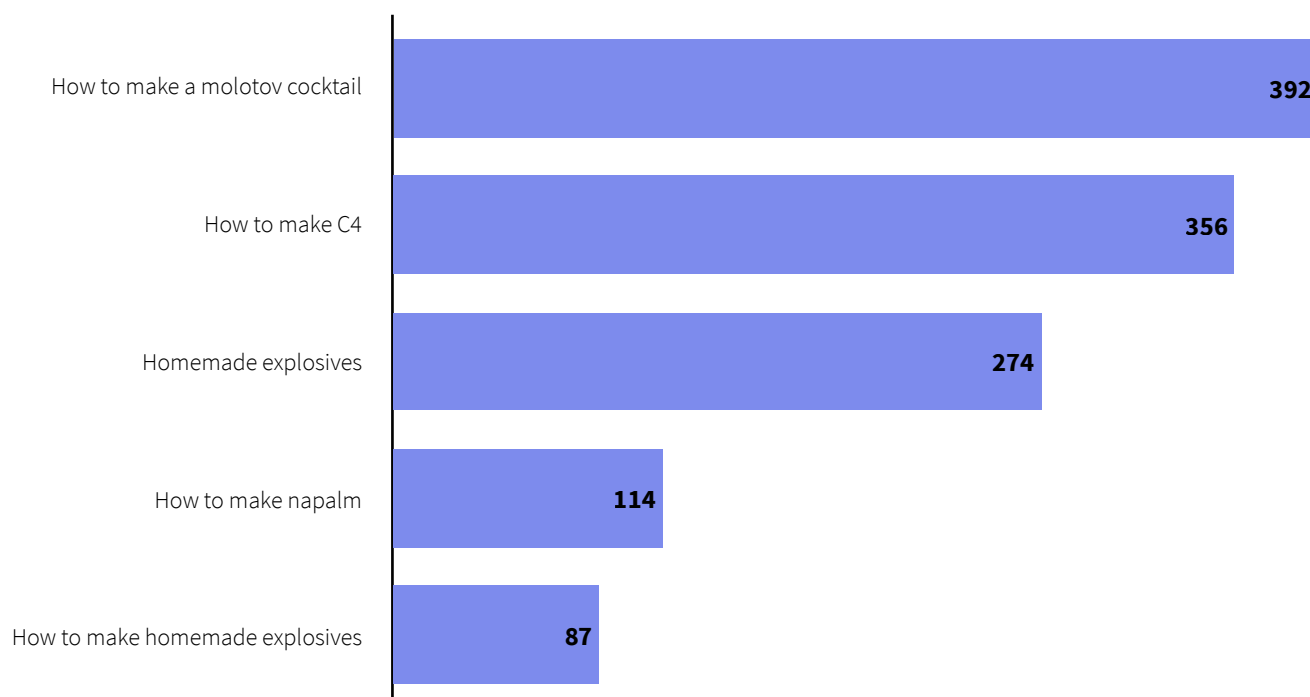Second, some of the most violent iconography and symbolism on display at the Capitol insurrection suggested that the actors were taking inspiration from well-known white supremacist sources. For example, a <u>makeshift gallows erected on the Capitol grounds</u> — which appeared to have "BIDEN" written on it — became symbolic of the day's events. The gallows was possibly a nod to the Day of the Rope, an event from the *Turner Diaries*, a book that has long been drawn upon for inspiration by white supremacists. In the novel, the <u>Day of the Rope</u> unfolds when members of Congress and the media, women in interracial relationships, and other "race traitors" are publicly hanged. The book also features an attack on the US Capitol, drawing clear ties between the specific methods used by white power activists in the *Turner Diaries* and those used by the insurrectionists on 6 January.

Written publications have long been the primary means of spreading extremist ideology among supporters. In contemporary contexts, influential text publications are a particularly efficient means of spreading extremist messages so they can be quickly uploaded and spread through online networks, giving texts a permanent online legacy. Publications can serve a number of different purposes, including tutorials on bomb-making to manifestos from influential actors.

Search activity for *The Anarchist Cookbook*, a 1971 publication containing instructions for home manufacturing of rudimentary explosives and weapons, reached their highest levels in the immediate aftermath of Election Day.

▽ *Searches for the Anarchist Cookbook, 16 September to 17 December*
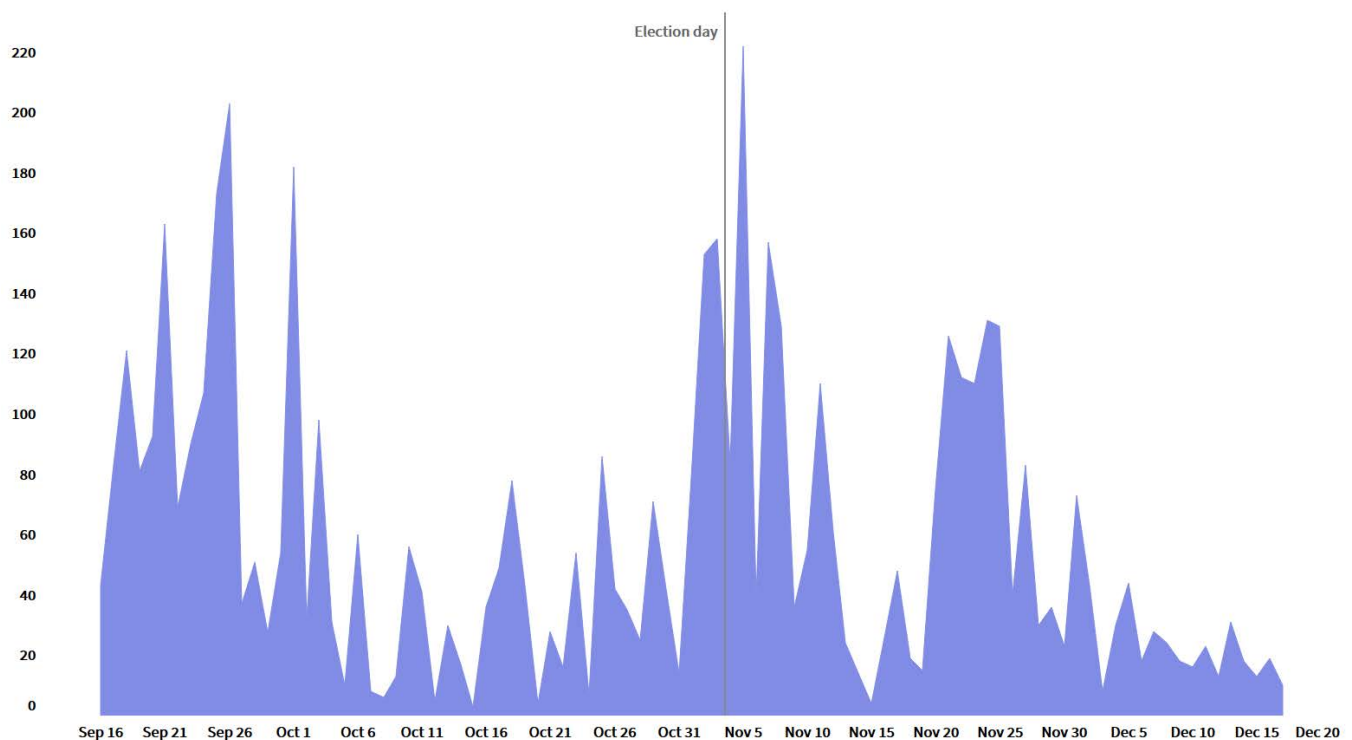
While online chatter within internet subcultures often features specific threats of violence and details for how those acts of violence can be executed, the Capitol siege conveys the significance of tracking online search trends; extremists are actively seeking how to craft explosive devices, and they are bringing those devices to rallies and protests. Moreover, the ties between online inspiration and offline symbolism can be seen not only through the presence of Molotov cocktails and IEDs, but also through the gallows constructed in the Capitol's shadow.

How did our messaging strategies resonate?

How did our messaging strategies resonate?

Every search engine user redirected by our campaign received a customized viewing experience on YouTube. These were designed to reflect the intent behind the original search in order to improve the content relevance and encourage greater levels of engagement.

Moonshot collaborated with subject-matter experts to curate playlists of pre-existing content available on YouTube, mixing traditional violence prevention counter-content applicable to the US context with messaging from relatable influencers in the election space, as well as mental health messaging aimed to reduce anger and potential mobilization to violence.

This section provides an overview of the data collected from our playlists during the project, broken down by the ideology being targeted. Our campaigns led to over 2,000 minutes of counter-narrative content being watched, with the majority of our curated content achieving sustained and promising engagement. For some playlists there is clear potential for higher levels of intervention from third party specialists in future deployments to effectively de-escalate where there is a particularly high risk of violence.

▶ Armed groups

The counter-messages curated for this category attempted to address the typical drivers of violence seen among armed groups and vigilantes hostile to the federal government.

Total views
604

Average time in playlist (minutes)
3 minutes and 24 seconds

Narrative/s debunked

▸ One of the videos discussed vigilantism, the role of law enforcement in society, and why intimidating or assaulting first responders is morally wrong.
▸ Another video was from a Southern gun owner speaking about how and why armed Black men are profiled by police, and the need for rural whites and minorities to work together peacefully for better representation in government ("unaccountable men with guns doesn't represent Americans….a Ruby Ridge happening every week [because of them]").

▶ Conspiracy theory

The counter-messages curated for this category sought to draw on users' analytical and investigative curiosity. It encouraged examination of the origins and desirability of conspiracy theories, as well as healthy dialogue with those outside of the "camp of those who think and talk and vote as we do."

Total views
214

Average time in playlist (minutes)
1 minutes and 48 seconds

Narrative/s debunked

▸ One of the videos encouraged viewers to seek out healthy dialogue on contentious issues with family and friends who hold different views, in order to have more informed conversations and gain greater understanding.
▸ Other videos in this category provided context and understanding as to where conspiracy theories come from, why people believe them, and how to resist them.

▶ Political violence

The counter-messages curated for this category aimed to address searchers' potential anger with the current American milieu and reduce the threat of mobilization to violence.

Total views
75

Average time in playlist (minutes)
36 seconds

Narrative/s debunked

▸ One video highlighted how anarchist violence is distinct from peaceful BLM protests; a common misconception among this audience.

▸ Another included commentary from a relatable voice highlighting the mutually destructive link between intimidation and violence ("Look at Kenosha. Look at Portland. Which side won there?").

▶ Targeted violence

The counter-messages curated for this category looked at the danger and impact of incitements to violence in American public discourse, and the drivers behind acts of targeted violence from credible, experienced voices.

Total views
60

Average time in playlist (minutes)
2 minutes and 30 seconds

Narrative/s debunked

▸ One video provided a statement on the need for Americans to be aware of how rhetoric from the media and politicians is used to divide the country, and normalizes violence against specific groups.

▸ The curated content also included a TED talk by a man who nearly committed a school shooting. It describes his experience growing up in an abusive household and what drove him to plan an atrocity, until acts of kindness changed his perspective and forced him to reflect on his emotional wellbeing, especially when making decisions. ("Love the ones you feel deserve it the least, because they need it the most.")

A previous version of this report included a screenshot of a content creator featured in our campaigns. As stated in the Report Update, Moonshot has updated the report to remove these screenshots following concerns raised about this content creator. We are committed to transparency as we grow and adapt the Redirect Method, and have updated the Lessons Learned section of this report to highlight our learnings.

Subreddit experiment

Moonshot also redirected a subset of high-risk QAnon-related searches to a subreddit, "dedicated to documenting, critiquing, and debunking the chan poster known as 'Q' and his devotees." The r/Qult_Headquarters subreddit includes posts by former adherents. Our ability to measure resonance is comparatively limited without access to Reddit analytics, but this micro-campaign experiment achieved a click-through rate (CTR) of 6.24%, which is significantly higher than both commercial CTR averages (~2%) and other Moonshot campaigns countering a range of online harms (~3-5%).

Clicks
337

Click-through rate
6.24%

Why r/Qult_Headquarters?

The post in the screenshot ("You guys were right") is from a former believer in Q who began following the movement in 2017. After Q's "plans" failed to materialize they became disillusioned and began to question their principles and beliefs. It is an open and honest account of a vulnerable person's journey into and back out of the cult of QAnon. The fact they are clearly still processing that journey would likely be of particular relevance to our audience. The comments are encouraging, supportive and affirming, and contain sound advice for anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in the same situation.
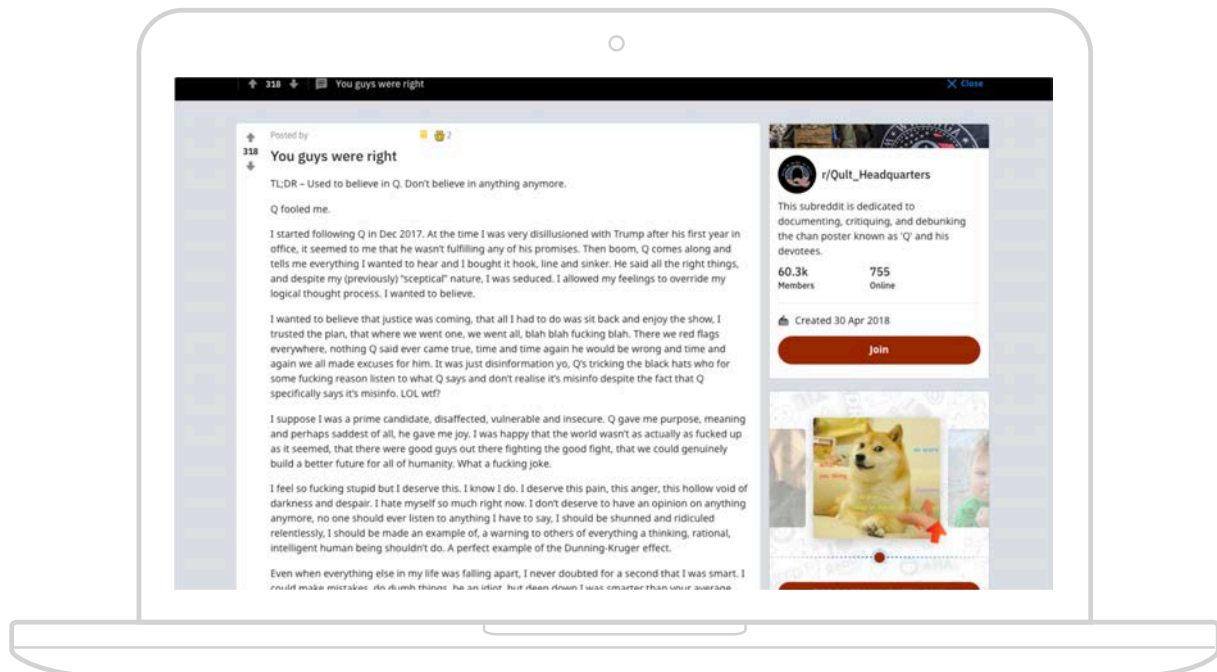
A thread from r/Qult_Headquarters entitled "You guys were right," in which the original poster explains at length how they came to believe in QAnon and the profoundly negative effect it has had on their life.

Conclusions and lessons learned
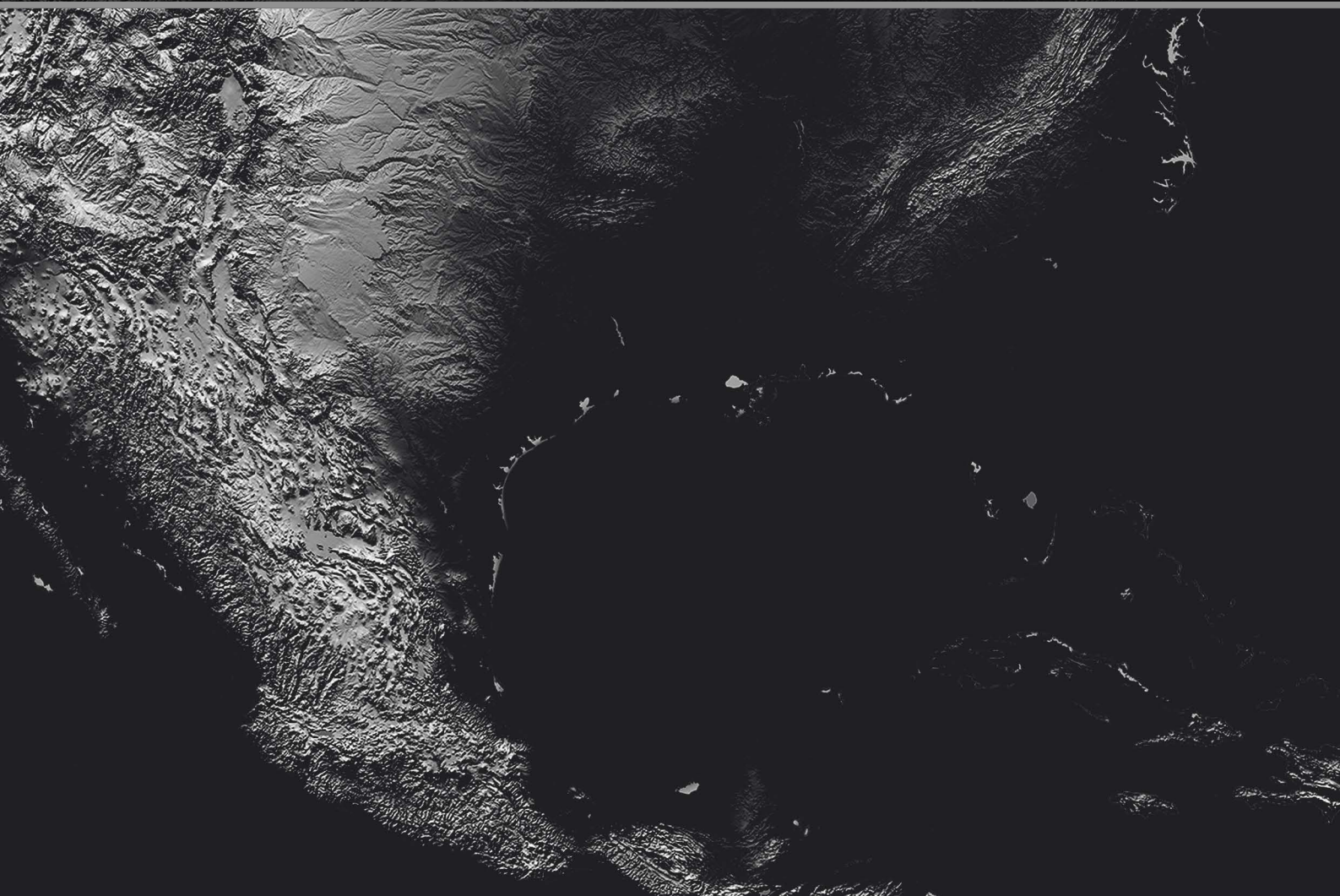
1 Online incitement can have deadly real-world consequences.

It is easy to dismiss the ability of online content to trigger real-world violence. Far-right online actors have long taken advantage of this tendency to hide behind the memes, trolling, hyperbole and irony that characterize online culture. This cultural camouflage has obscured the movement's intentions and allowed governments and the tech industry to consistently underestimate real-world prospects for violence that can be generated through online discourse and organization.

The internet at once empowers and endangers individuals, who can build a world of meaning where violence seems not just acceptable but necessary. The internet's original promise of unlocking a fuller expression of political and cultural activism has over time been derided by skeptics as little more than "slacktivism"/"clicktivism" and led to reasonable (if overstated) doubts about the internet's role in inciting violence. Indeed, it is far easier to measure how real-world events impact the online space than it is to clearly establish that online chatter can lead to offline activism and violence.

Some commentators have described the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 as a failure when compared to the stated goals of many of the rioters. But when it comes to assessing the nature of the threat we now face, this is the wrong comparison. The attack was less lethal than many of the scenarios experts such as those at ADL and Moonshot envisioned, but it was much more politically symbolic. The Capitol rioters had a direct and successful confrontation with the institutions that they believe have oppressed them. For a few hours on 6 January, rioters rendered the US government impotent. It was all broadcast globally in real time, and celebratory images, stories and memes will have a long life online.

The first decade of global al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorism was marked by repeated spectacular acts of terrorism, designed as much to communicate as to kill. Among the global audience that watched the attack on the Capitol building were individuals who may be inspired by the propaganda of this undeniably spectacular deed. Like the perpetrators of the attacks at El Paso, Isla Vista, Pittsburgh and Christchurch, they may already be lurking in the very same online spaces as those who attacked the Capitol, and may feel inspired to take matters into their own hands.

2 The US Capitol attack was just the latest example of far-right violence against American politicians.

Dissent is a key tenet of democracy, and yet Trump's detractors and political opponents have been met with threats and violence throughout his time in office. In October 2018, Cesar Sayoc sent 16 mail bombs to Democratic Party figureheads including President Obama, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, George Soros and Tom Steyer. Sayoc himself claimed, "I sent all 16 devices with the intent to threaten or intimidate." Another attacker is being charged with bringing nylon restraints into the Capitol with the goal of taking hostages. There is currently an investigation underway to determine if the panic buttons discovered to be missing from Rep. Ayanna Pressley's office were removed as part of pre-siege preparations, alongside an investigation into whether members of Congress provided inappropriate access to the Capitol to visitors prior to the 6 January siege. These potential preparation efforts appear to align with broader pre-attack discourse online, but lack the sophisticated coordination to capture and execute members of Congress that previous reports indicated. While the acting US Attorney for the District of Columbia has stated that there is presently no direct evidence that the Capitol attackers featured "kill capture teams," he nevertheless pointed to "bread crumbs of organization [...] with some coordinated activity of the individuals within the Capitol." Overall, the degree to which online chatter translated into offline organization on 6 January remains to be seen.

This series of threats that unfolded offline are similar in nature to the threats of political violence the Moonshot team tracked online. It has never been more dangerous to be a politician in the US.

3 The future of the far right online is far from certain.

Whereas other social movements appeared to coalesce or peak around one central event or spate of events — such as the 2016 Women's March and the 2020 BLM rallies — far-right mobilization has been long running and steadily escalating. It remains unclear how Donald Trump's departure from the US presidency will affect the movement. Additionally, the fracturing occurring amongst the broader movement will likely have implications on groups' ability to coordinate — for better or for worse. While the lack of centrality and potential for collaboration may lower the risk of violence, it is also possible that lone actors with an unsatiated or even magnified desire for violence may break away from more moderating voices.

While there was widespread consensus within the online far-right movement that violent protests would (and should) happen after the election, that consensus has been broken in the aftermath of the 6 January attack. While some far-right groups and Trump supporters believe that violent protest of Biden's inauguration on 20 January is their last chance to "stop the steal," others fear that planned events could in fact be traps set by law enforcement or antifa/BLM.

The far-right's influence in mainstream political life is also in question. While many users convey increased desperation and paranoia about what a Biden presidency and democratic legislature may mean for the preservation of capitalism and the Constitution, Trump's incitement of post-election violence appears to have shattered his reputation. Fully 68% of Americans polled in the wake of the 6 January attack do not want Trump to be continuing presence in national politics.

4 The 2020 Election wasn't the beginning of the end, it was the end of the beginning.

As the data in this report helps to demonstrate, the individuals who laid siege to the US Capitol have built a social movement that will outlast the political moment we are in. The most resilient and insidious parts of the movement are rooted in conspiratorial beliefs, mis- and disinformation, and white supremacy. These are long term problems that will require a comprehensive strategy. There's never been a better time to start, but it will take years.

The broader movement will likely survive President Trump's departure from office because the conditions that led to widespread fear of election violence in 2020 will endure. While the outcome of the election will be at the core of grievances and conspiratorial narratives for the coming months, other rallying cries will inevitably arise and fuel further activism and risk of violence. The movement's refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 election will continue to fuel their activism, but this may lose potency if President Trump himself recedes from public view. The continued vitality of the movement depends on identifying new drivers and grievances to justify continued attention. There is no doubt that these narratives and calls to arms will be forged in online far-right communities.

5 Continued violence prevention will require more aggressive approaches. We need to continue negotiating ethical and privacy implications.

Publicly available data paints a picture of confusion and disconnectedness in goals, objectives and beliefs within many far-right communities. Many users bicker, debate and bemoan their lack of coordination and leadership. A more determined and organized cohort of activists also occasionally appears in public data, but the vast majority of their coordination happens in closed (and often encrypted) venues.

This dynamic resembles what we saw at the US Capitol — a large, disorganized mob led by a small, well-organized vanguard. At the doors of the Capitol, there was a lot of encouragement but very little courage; while many entered the Capitol, the vast majority milled around outside, claiming their own small part in history but failing to act in a coordinated way. These two groups — the mob and the vanguard — will continue to manifest online into the future. However, we fully anticipate that most of the coherent negotiation of tactics and strategy will happen in closed spaces like encrypted chat platforms and access-controlled forums.

There is an ethical imperative to act to disrupt these threats, but recent history has shown us how easily civil liberties can be infringed upon in the name of security. Individual researchers and activists will need to revisit and re-evaluate their ethical commitments and take responsibility for their choices. Sustained, meaningful threat reduction will also require collaboration and shared vision from government, civil society and the tech platforms where this activity occurs.

6* Delivery of digital campaigns to reach audiences at risk of far-right violence requires the highest standards of due diligence to uphold 'do no harm' principles.

Engaging with audiences at risk of violent extremism requires careful consideration of the potential impact of a piece of content on a vulnerable individual. This due diligence must go beyond the content itself, and examine whether the content creator is authentic, credible, and aligned with the values of the project.

In delivery of this project, we became aware of a gap in our systems when we received information about a creator whose content featured in our campaigns. This creator had engaged in activities online which undermined the objectives and values of the project. As soon as these concerns were raised, we swiftly removed the content from our playlists. However, this error in our own systems reinforced the critical need for robust due diligence and risk assessment processes in the selection of content to place in front of vulnerable individuals.

7 Reducing violence and rebuilding trust will require coordination and creativity. We know it's possible.

The swift, decisive action taken by tech companies to shutter fringe platforms paired with the newly aggressive approach of federal law enforcement look to compose a useful model for future threat reduction. Civil society also played a critical role in this effort, exerting pressure on tech platforms to act and systematically gather evidence for use by law enforcement. Together we met the moment, but ensuring we do so again will require careful debriefing, relationship building and accountability.

Future efforts will require much more creativity and vision. De-platforming extremists is a tactic, not a strategy. It breaks the momentum of the movement, but does nothing to rehabilitate the individuals who fill its ranks in the long term. As this report demonstrates, many (though not all) actors who make up these groups have significant vulnerabilities that have contributed to their participation. We need to find more ways to help these individuals make meaning in their lives in less destructive ways.

*This Lesson Learned was added to the report on February 12th, 2021, following the events noted in the Report Update.

Appendix

Table shows database evolution in response to escalating tension during the election cycle.

Date	Keywords added	Estimated running total
16 September	Campaigns contained an initial sample database of 14,000 indicators covering armed groups, political violence and targeted violence.	14,000
16 - 27 September	Moonshot added 56,242 indicators of political violence to include Supreme Court nominees, Senate challengers and sitting Congresspeople.	70,242
28 September - 4 October	Moonshot added 716 keywords indicative of support for armed groups, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, including variations on how to join these groups, send cash donations, purchase sponsored merchandise such as hats and t-shirts, and connect with group members on prominent platforms such as Telegram and TikTok.	70,958
5 - 11 October	Moonshot added 37,240 keywords to safeguard searches related to partisan violence (e.g. "best way to stab Lefties") and threats of violence towards journalists and pundits. Moonshot also added 53 variations related to the FEMA conspiracy theory.	108,251
2 - 18 October	Moonshot added 13,965 indicators to safeguard searches related to threats of violence against sitting governors and the mayors of 50 US cities. 257 keywords were also added related to searches for the following armed groups: Patriot Muster, the Black Robe Regiment, the Wolverine Watchmen, and the Michigan Liberty Militia.	122,473
19 - 25 October	Moonshot added 941 indicators to safeguard against searches related to conspiracy theories that may lead to election-related violence, namely QAnon.	123,414
26 October - 1 November	Moonshot added 76 indicators to safeguard against searches for platforms where armed groups were known to be mobilizing online, such as Zello, Parler and MyMilitia.	123,490
2 - 8 November	Moonshot added 168 search variations related to Proud Boys organizing to become poll watchers as well as variations for the three most active militias in Georgia, identified by MilitiaWatch and ACLED as one of the states at greatest risk of pre- and post-election violence: the Georgia Martyrs, Georgia Security Force, and Georgia State Militia. Moonshot also added a small sample of indicators related to election integrity (e.g. "stop the steal," and "Sharpiegate").	123,668
9 - 22 November	Moonshot added 399 indicators to safeguard searches related to threats of political violence against Georgia Democratic politician Stacey Abrams, and politically partisan terms used in violent online forums, such as "hypocrats" and "dementiacrats."	124,067
23 - 29 November	Moonshot added 180 indicators to safeguard searches related to smaller armed groups whose leadership or members called for or supported election-related violence, including the Proud American Patriot Network, New Virginia Militia, Virginia Knights Militia and American Contingency.	124,247

Date	Keywords added	Estimated running total
30 November - 6 December	Moonshot added 268 indicators related to escalating election integrity tension in Georgia. Search variations for killing or harming Georgia's Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, and former CISA Director Chris Krebs. Moonshot also added 999 new political violence search variations related to threatening language used on online forums, such as calling for politicians to be "hanged for treason." Finally, Moonshot added 24 indicators related to disinformation actors' mobilization around legal challenges to the election results, such as QAnon's rallying cry: "release the kraken."	125,538
7 - 13 December	Moonshot added 100 new indicators to reflect the increased focus within armed groups and conspiracy theorists on events in the build up to Inauguration Day, such as "inauguration day qanon" and "Proud Boys inauguration day event."	125,658