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Protests and Radicalization in the Digital Age

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PROTESTS AND RADICALIZATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Reopen Movement

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Protests and Radicalization in the Digital Age

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Abstract: This Element provides the first large-scale inquiry into the “Reopen” protest movement against COVID-19 public health shutdowns. We synthesize digital ethnography inside the movement with text analyses of an original dataset spanning more than 1.8 million Facebook comments and posts from over 224,000 online activists. We characterize the movement’s origin, growth, and evolution as it interacted with public policies and offline protests. We explain individual- and group-level dynamics of radicalization over time, across topics, and, paradoxically, in response to content moderation. We extend existing theories of contentious politics to suggest that movements that fail to maintain their connection to offline organizations are especially prone to mutability, radicalization, and exhaustion. Together, our findings offer a powerful theoretical framework for understanding social movements in the digital age, while updating and extending classical social movement theory.

Keywords: social movements, radicalization, public health, political science, digital politics

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They closed your businesses. They closed your schools. They closed your churches. They closed your beaches. They banned parties. They banned funerals. They banned graduation ceremonies. They banned nursing home visitors. They banned hospital visits. They banned Dads in the delivery rooms. They banned travel to certain states. They even designated what constitutes a meal. They allowed protests. They allowed riots. They allowed anarchists to co-opt cities. They allowed the storming of police precincts. They allowed the assault of peacekeepers. They allowed multiple funerals for people that fit their agenda. They allowed businesses to be destroyed. They allowed gun stores to be closed. They allowed statues to be vandalized. They allowed Churches to be set on fire. They allowed the infringement of our liberty. They allowed our Constitution to be ignored. Vote WISELY in November 3, 2020 to save America! Vote TRUMP2020  and Vote Republican down Ballot. #VoteRepublican #WhyVoteRed #WideAwake
(Reopen Activist on Facebook, August 8, 2020)

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced governments around the globe to shut down schools, businesses, public transportation, and any location where the deadly virus might be transmitted. This resulted in one of the largest economic dislocations in history, with the US recording an unprecedented loss of 22.1 million jobs, the highest unemployment rate since data collection began (CRS 2021). Throughout American history, periods of severe economic downturn – 1827–1836, 1881–1886, and 1933–1937 – created political opportunities, as discontented groups allied with radical movements for change (Bernstein 1954; Dunlop 1948 309). So, too, is there a long history of protest against public health restrictions, including the cholera riots in the 1800s and the antimask protests during the 1918 influenza pandemic (Dolan 2020). This Element explains how the COVID-19 pandemic birthed a similar impulse – the movement to “Reopen” states from quarantine and lockdown – and shows how an initially nonpartisan movement radicalized over time, across topics, and, paradoxically, in response to content moderation. More theoretically, we update theories of movement change for the digital age, connecting digital and hybrid movements (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) to protest cycles (Beissinger 1996a; Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989a, 2011). The Reopen movement highlights the malleability of online movements, their propensity for exhaustion and radicalization, and the fragility of social movements in the digital age. We propose that Reopen be viewed as a kind of *disposable social movement* associated with American conservative institutions rather than a self-sustaining and enduring movement capable of durable social and political transformation. In that respect, this Element provides a cautionary tale about the power and peril of digital movements.

The Reopen protests began small. Militia leader Ammon Bundy was an early riser in March 2020, posting a video on Facebook inviting people to disobey the Idaho Governor's self-isolation order (Mencimer 2020). Shortly after, a mix of libertarians, Tea Party activists, anti-vaccine activists, and conspiracy theorists created the Facebook group "Michigan United for Liberty," encouraging people to lobby their legislators against shutdowns by Governor Gretchen Whitmer and organizing a small protest on April 7th in front of the Lansing capital (Oosting and Roelofs 2020). Two days later and 230 miles south, around 100 protestors gathered to oppose Governor Mike Dewine's shutdown orders. By mid-April, the movement exploded in size and scope, with protests in at least thirty-nine states and an estimated 33,000 participants (CCC 2020; Martiny 2021). That offline activity paled in comparison to online mobilization on Facebook, where more than 1,000 Facebook groups with nearly 2.5 million members came together to oppose COVID-19 public health policies. While the protests began small, by the end of April 2020, the Reopen movement was a massive, organized, nationwide mobilization against COVID-19 public health policies, especially masking and lockdowns.

What are the origins, evolution, and significance of the Reopen movement? How did the movement change, and why? Why should scholars care? To answer these questions, we spent two years investigating the movement, using a combination of digital ethnography, computational linguistics, and panel data analysis. We provide the first systematic investigation of this mass movement as it shaped and reshaped civic mobilization during the pandemic, and as it shifted from a nonpartisan protest movement into a radical echo-chamber full of misinformation. More theoretically, the Reopen movement raises important questions about radicalization and the organization and impact of protest in the digital age, challenging conventional theories of cycles of contention and how social movements end.

Our findings make three contributions to the study of contentious politics. First, we find that the canonical "cycle of protest" and "connective action" frameworks need to be adapted for the digital age: the low barriers to entry, weaker ties among activists, and forum-like architecture of digital movements can lead them to experience quick changes in membership and direction. Social media algorithms are designed for individuals, not movements, and digital movements have an architecture that invites fragmentation, radicalization, and exhaustion. We find that the low cost of entry, weak social ties, and forum-like architecture of digital movements can lead to more dramatic rises and falls compared to traditional protest cycles, as well as an increased likelihood of radicalization. While "connective action" marshals a different social movement logic than "collective action" those connections are weaker and more distracted,

and thus make for more disposable social movements than organizationally brokered networks.

Second, one of the most significant implications of this research involves furthering our understanding of microlevel processes of mobilization and pathways to radicalization. We show that Facebook's approach to moderation may have exacerbated and helped sustain radicalization within the Reopen movement. Several of the largest and most active Reopen groups were shut down when protests threatened government institutions. The hardest-core members of these shuttered groups then spread across the Reopen landscape just as the movement was reaching a period of success-induced exhaustion. With this shift came a large decline in engagement and a discursive shift away from economic concerns and toward racism. An always-present strain of anti-Chinese attitudes was dwarfed by anti-Black sentiment. Facebook's group-level (rather than user-level) ban dispersed toxicity. As the discourse became more toxic, a second wave of activists joined the groups. These second-wave users became the most active spreaders of misinformation. The early discourse on the economic consequences of lockdown was now overtaken by misinformation, conspiracy theories, and references to violence. In sum, over time the movement radicalized, though not in the way that would be apparent by focusing only on offline protest data, and not in ways that cycle theory predicts. In the digital age, scholars of social movements need to map the architecture of online and hybrid movements since that structure can affect the goals of the movement, movement resilience, and the process of radicalization.

Third and finally, we hope that our creative synthesis of research methods provides a model for future scholars. We began with ethnographic observation, witnessing the movement's birth and immersing ourselves in its inner workings and emotional state. We watched the growth of the community online, its mobilization offline, and its gradual evolution. We married those ethnographic insights to a newly developed tool to collect Facebook posts and comments from 93 private groups and 399 public groups and pages. Using methods from computational linguistics, we then characterized the discursive evolution of the movement and tracked posters and commenters across Reopen groups. We further linked online movement activity to state closures and offline protest activity in order to better understand movement dynamics. We show how online and offline mobilizations interacted and highlight the important role of decentralized grassroots activism in fueling the movement's transition from a nonpartisan town hall for economic grievances into a right-wing ideological echo chamber.

This Element proceeds as follows. [Section 2](#) situates the Reopen movement within the literature on cycles of contention, digital movements, and the Tea

Party in order to argue for extending theories of contentious politics. We suggest that movements that fail to maintain their connection to offline organizations are especially prone to change goals, radicalize, and become exhausted. [Section 3](#) introduces our methods and novel data sources. [Section 4](#) describes the movement's origins, diffusion, exhaustion, institutionalization, and radicalization. [Section 5](#) concludes with implications for scholarship on social movements in the digital age.

2 Cycles of Contention, the Tea Party, and the Reopen Movement

What are the origins, evolution, and significance of the Reopen movement? How did the movement change, and why? What can the movement teach scholars of social movements in the digital age? Answering these questions requires synthesizing the literatures on cycles of contention, the Tea Party, and digital activism into an overarching framework. The backbone of the framework is the cycle of contention (also called protest cycle theory). And yet that theory was born of mass mobilization in the 1970s and before the birth of online and hybrid movements. As a result, we extend theories of contentious politics to account for the speed, power, mutability, and radicalization of hybrid movements. Drawing on theories of “connective action,” we suggest that movements that fail to maintain their connection to offline organizations are especially prone to change goals, radicalize, and become exhausted.

We start with cycles of contention. Mass mobilization tends to cluster in time, which is why the literature on protest cycles is some of the oldest in social movement theory. Using data from the late 1880s, Hansen (1921, 618) found that labor strikes were most likely during troughs in the business cycle, as well as in tight labor markets when workers had greater bargaining power. Doug McAdam (1982, 36, 40) developed an explicitly political account for the rise and fall of collective action, similar to work by Rule and Tilly (1965), going beyond economic forces to explain a continuous political process from genesis to decline, in interaction with the larger environment. In the late 1980s, Tarrow (1989a, 1989b) refined the theory, arguing that a cycle begins when the costs of collective action are low and the incentives high. It grows when new actors enter into conflicts between existing organizations and institutions, increasing the types of protest and creating new political coalitions (1989a, 8). The new actors expand the “repertoire” of contention and increase mobilization. Such mobilization produces countermovements since they, too, see an opportunity for influence. The cycle peaks when an organized coalition uses a broad range of tactics, exploiting the opportunity to press their grievance (Tarrow 1989a, 13–14). Such

mobilization is costly and unsustainable over the long term, which is why over time the cycle leads to the institutionalization of some demands and the radicalization of those protestors unwilling to accept reform (1989a, 337).

Scholars have deployed the protest cycle framework to explain patterns of mass mobilization around the globe. Beissinger (1996a) used “tides of contention” and “tides of mobilization” to explain how nationalist mobilization developed and spread transnationally. Mobilization provides the occasion to “switch worlds” (Beissinger 1996a). Beissinger also confirms Della Porta and Tarrow’s (1986) insight that violence tends to shadow protest cycles. Brockett (1993, 474–475) explained patterns of repression in central America, arguing that state repression prior to the mobilization of protest is likely to deter popular mobilization, while repression during the ascendant phase is likely to provoke mass oppositional activities. White (1993) applied the theory to describe the origins, evolution, and impact of protests in early modern Japan, finding that economic rather than political forces drove the cycle, which did not diffuse absent mass literacy and communication. Meyer nests the cycle in its larger context: Movements emerge and adapt to the larger political opportunity structure and can quickly fracture when the state offers even symbolic concessions (Meyer 1993a, 1993b).

While protest cycle theory went global in the 1990s, its utility has been questioned in recent decades. Its empirical foundation has remained underdeveloped, which is why McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001, 67–88) called on scholars to shift attention away from the conditions that give rise to waves and toward the micro dynamics within-movement cycles.¹ Unclear, too, is the theory’s utility in a digital age given that contemporary movements organize online as much as offline. Scholars have yet to put the digital movements literature into sustained conversation with cycles of contention, leaving open questions about temporal change in digital and hybrid movements.

How do digital technologies change social movements? The literature on digital and hybrid movements is one of the most dynamic areas of social movement research. While fifteen years ago some hopeful scholars envisioned new technologies as structurally “liberatory” (Diamond 2010) subsequent research has demonstrated both the possibilities and perils of digital technologies. More productive (and less normatively burdened), has been the move to analyze how digital technologies change the organizing principles of social movements as well as their outcomes (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Tufekci 2017). We build on that latter move to suggest that the temporal evolution of

¹ An exception is Chang and Lee (2021), which is similar to this Element in empirically operationalizing the concept.

digital and hybrid movements is different from traditional protest cycles, as well as the outcome. The low cost of entry, weak social ties, and forum-like architecture of digital movements can make for a more dramatic rise and fall than in traditional protest cycles, as well as an increased propensity for radicalization.

Digital and hybrid movements offer the possibility of a lower barrier to entry than offline movements, and can expand the public sphere, especially in authoritarian regimes (Diamond 2010; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Social media platforms allow activists to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as political parties and activist elites, providing alternative channels to frame grievances and mobilize supporters (Bennett 2012; Margetts et al. 2019). It can facilitate new forms of social solidarity and open up space for marginalized groups historically kept out of activism to challenge social norms (Murthy 2018; van Haperen et al. 2018). For example, hashtags such as #MeToo and #SayHerName helped surface personal experiences that previously remained invisible or unaddressed in mainstream discourse (Jackson et al. 2020). These possibilities can facilitate the emergence of leaderless or loosely coordinated movements that nonetheless achieve significant scale, as seen in the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong (Earl 2007; Lee and Chan 2018; Tufekci 2017). While some scholars argue that the internet has no impact on activism (Diani 2000), more common is the view that digital tools expand possibilities for activism (Fisher and Boekkooi 2010; Myers 1994), or more fundamentally change activism (Bimber et al. 2005).

Yet, that possibility may not be equally accessible. Working-class groups still face economic and social barriers to activism. Rather than reducing costs to political participation, digitalization increases costs and thus contributes to digital activism inequality (Schradie 2018). Greater access to digital networks can facilitate the spread of antidemocratic behavior, such as intolerance and hate crimes. Higher penetration of social media in Russia has led to more ethnic hate crimes in those cities with a high preexisting level of nationalist sentiment (Bursztyn et al. 2024). Different social media platforms have different “affordances” or implications for political behavior (Earl and Kimport 2011; Tufekci 2017). For young Chileans, for example, participation in Facebook increased the likelihood of mass mobilization, while Instagram did not (Scherman and Rivera 2021). Authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies alike can also use digital tools, including selective access to the internet, censorship and surveillance, and misinformation to increase their control over society, including social movements (Gunitsky 2015; Hintz and Milan 2018). Nascent conservative movements such as the Reopen movement may be at an advantage in the digital sphere – sociologists such as Jen Schradie have extensively documented how the Internet and digital tools are tilted in favor of conservative activists (Schradie 2019).

Where does that debate leave protest cycles? A digital pessimist might suggest that social media cuts short protest cycles or derails them completely. Such a claim should be taken seriously; we live in an age of climate catastrophe, democratic decline, increasing economic inequality, and digital distraction. Given the many hours that we routinely spend online, it is reasonable to believe that social media is contributing to the weakening of civil society, social movements, and democracy.

Instead, we suggest that an updated version of protest cycle theory continues to hold promise for understanding contemporary social movements. The theory provides a powerful *framework* for explaining the origins, internal dynamics, and fate of the Reopen movement and others like it. The framework predicts that protest movements grow from a change in the political opportunity structure (Meyer 1993a) and a coalition between established organizations and newly mobilized grassroots members of society (McAdam 1982, 44). Protest mobilization then diffuses across regions and social sectors. The most successful and transferable innovations in the “repertoire of contention” are then used in different places under different sociopolitical circumstances (Snow, Soule, Kreisi and McCammon 2018, 242). Old organizations adapt during such moments rather than being dissolved. New discursive frames are born, tested, and refined (Tarrow 1989b, 46–48).

We argue that the architecture of online movements has a crucial impact on the middle and end of the cycle, specifically. Existing theory rightly notes that movements decline as the organizational structure weakens due to internal dissent and group fragmentation, as backlash from the larger society closes the window of opportunity, as movements radicalize in the face of moderate dropout, and as institutions either repress the movement or coopt its priorities (McAdam 1982, 227–228; Meyer 1993b). That process is accelerated online. A movement built on Facebook invites ideological fracture, repurposing, and distraction. While “connective action” marshals a different logic than “collective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), such weak connections make for a more disposable social movement than organizationally brokered networks. That weakness is especially impactful at the end of the protest cycle as the movement exhausts, radicalizes, and gets coopted.

Protest cycle theory thus needs updating to help explain the trajectory of social movements organized online. Social media can hasten growth faster online than offline, expand geographic and social reach, reduce barriers to entry to the public sphere, and provide new mediums such as memes and hashtags to engage supporters (Tucker et al. 2017; Tufekci 2017). Speed is also a liability; it can lead to shallow commitments (“slacktivism”) and low organizational capacity to adapt to change and repression. Yet, shallow

commitments sometimes unpredictably scale up support for a social movement's cause, injecting new forms of uncertainty and instability into politics (Margetts et al. 2019). Our findings support this: As the movement develops online, offline organizations may be unable to control the content or goals, leading to greater mutability and fracture. Our findings also support recent literature showing that social media platforms themselves may inadvertently play a role in the radicalization process and further spread of global hate networks with their choices in policing and interventions (Johnson et al. 2019). Paired with social media's propensity for polarization and racism (Noble 2018; Vaidhyathan 2018), we predict more radicalization and less institutionalization among online movements.

The pathways for radicalization are multiplied in the digital age. While radicalization traditionally followed the end of the protest cycle (Beissinger 1996a; Della Porta and Tarrow 1986), digital movements provide ample opportunities for radicalization. Social media lowers the barrier to entry for all types of activists, moderate and radical alike (Tucker et al. 2017). Movement leaders have few tools to "vet" new activists or information, thus increasing the likelihood for radicalization. Meanwhile, Tarrow rightly suggests that radicalization results from moderates dropping out of the movement while radicals remain. For online movements, that radicalism in the early stages can lead moderates to drop out of the movement more quickly than in-person movements, where social connections encourage moderation. Finally, the low barriers to entry provide an opportunity for radical latecomers to repurpose a movement even in the late stages. In sum, in the digital age, social movements scholars must map the architecture of online and hybrid movements since online structure can significantly impact the opportunities, timing, and dynamics of radicalization.

Applied to the Reopen movement, the first year of the movement followed the historical "parabola of protest" seen in the French Revolution, Italy and the United States in the 1960s, and the nationalist mobilizations against the Soviet Union (Beissinger 1996a; Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989a; Tarrow 2011). The movement originated in an ideologically diverse mix of grassroots activists concerned about the economic effects of the shutdowns in March and April 2020. It was initially nonpartisan and in the early stages, activist discussions were characterized by nonpartisan concerns about the economic impact of lockdowns. Membership exploded and engagement spiked as the movement morphed into a hybrid online/offline mobilization organizing nationwide protests. The movement grew in size due to support from conservative political organizations and activists who created hundreds of similarly named Facebook groups and used paid advertisements to attract members and grow offline protests. Those offline protests helped to grow the online community, shifting the volume of posts on

Facebook in the subsequent days. We found a steady rise in activity within state-specific Reopen groups in the weeks leading up to the end of state-level lockdown policies and a sharp and steady decline almost immediately thereafter. One novel finding is that those offline protests are a key vehicle for building an online social movement. In a digital age, the function of protests may be changing; the effect of an offline protest may be to grow and engage the movement online, reducing the tendency toward fragmentation and distraction that are endemic to digital activism.

That said, the rapid growth of the movement had a paradoxical effect on movement cohesion. Once created, the Facebook groups were no longer under the control of elites. And as a result, the content and evolution of the grassroots diverged from the policy preferences of the elite. While Facebook provided a powerful tool for movement organizers to reach the grassroots, the platform raised challenges for the communication networks that are vital to any movement's success (McAdam 1982, 46). The rapidly created online architecture of the movement made it vulnerable to distraction, radicalization, and exhaustion.

Online activity peaked just prior to states lifting strict lockdowns in May and June 2020, and thereafter, the movement drifted from its original goal, radicalized, and exhausted. The movement was coopted and overtaken by Donald Trump's presidential campaign, an early preview of how the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement would similarly capture the Republican Party. A key moment was the reopening of states, leading some activists to proclaim victory and close down their groups. The June 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, which were initially supported by some activists, also shifted the goals of the movement, with the remaining activists pivoting from demands to "reopen" to "law & order" and overt support for President Trump. Racism became prominent in response to BLM. The movement also became swamped with misinformation and conspiracy theories, with the first surge in early May when the "Plandemic" video went viral and the second around the 2020 election. More surprisingly, we found that one of the forces driving radicalization was Facebook's content moderation policy. Users from banned Reopen groups flooded into the groups that remained open, and quickly changed the pattern of discussion in the groups they entered.

Radicalization also accompanied the aftermath of the election, including group members using the groups to coordinate protests against the counting of ballots and attending the Jan 6th protests at the US Capitol. Another, less visible pathway to radicalization was the shutdown of one of the earliest groups, which led the activists to join other groups and diffuse their toxicity nationwide. Another final path to toxicity was latecomers to the movement that joined after the initial period and on some issues demonstrated greater radicalism than the

initial organizers. In sum, over time, the movement shifted and radicalized, though not in the way that would be apparent by focusing only on offline protest data, and not in ways that cycle theory predicts. In sum, in the digital age, scholars of social movements need to map the architecture of online and hybrid movements since that structure can affect the goals of the movement, movement resilience, and the potential for radicalization.

Before detailing our research methods, a comparison of the Reopen movement and the Tea Party is necessary. The Reopen movement's connection to longstanding organizations in American conservatism, its early emphasis on economic issues, frequent invocations of "liberty," and the speed of its organization raise questions about the movement's relationship to the Tea Party. Was the Reopen movement a campaign by the Tea Party? Did it stem from the same social actors?

Early observers of the Reopen movement suggested that it was elite-driven ("Astroturf"), epiphenomenal and unlikely to be the "next Tea Party" (Illing and Skocpol 2020). Because of the involvement of elite organizations, we were able to assess the overlap of actors, policy priorities, and movement evolution with those that characterized the Tea Party. We found multiple points of overlap. The demographic makeup of the Tea Party was white, middle-class, older, conservative, predominantly evangelical or born-again Protestants (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012). A small survey of people who attended Reopen protests suggests that they were more likely to identify as Republicans than Democrats (Chenoweth et al. 2022, Table A3). Both movements attracted militias and hard-right conservatives (Zeskind 2012). There were also frustrated far-right conservatives in both movements who contrasted themselves to centrist RINOs (Republican In Name Only) (Zeskind 2012). The Reopen movement radicalized in response to the BLM protests, similar to the white racial resentment that motivated some within the Tea Party (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012; Zeskind 2012). Both movements represented a small fraction of Americans, and yet had an outsized media presence (Chenoweth et al. 2020; Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011, 30). Both movements had connections with Tea Party Patriots and FreedomWorks, organizations with a long history in Washington and a relatively new connection to the grassroots (Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011). Both the Tea Party and Reopen were eventually consumed by the MAGA movement (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017). Both movements were portrayed by the media as grassroots and working class, despite having strong ties to established political organizations and their members being middle-income (Boykoff and Laschever 2011). In that respect, the Reopen movement was indeed a new campaign emanating from long-standing elements in US conservatism.

That said, there are also important differences between the Reopen movement and the Tea Party. A survey of 115 attendees of offline Reopen protests described themselves as younger, more racially diverse, higher educated, and lower income than the general population (Chenoweth et al. 2022). Leading Reopen activists had no prior connection to the Tea Party or even Republicans. Reducing government spending and lowering taxes were central goal of the Tea Party, but not a priority for the Reopen movement (Arceneaux and Nicholson 2012). Racial resentment was also more central and prominent in the Tea Party than the Reopen movement, though this may have been a product of the Tea Party's opposition to the country's first African American president, Barack Obama. The main targets of the Reopen movement – Gretchen Whitmer, Joe Biden, and Anthony Fauci – are white, and racial resentment only became prominent after BLM protests. Immigration was not central to the Reopen movement as it was for the Tea Party. The formal organizations associated with the Tea Party, such as Tea Party Nation, 1776 Tea Party, and Tea Party Express were not visible in the Reopen movement (Bailey, Mummolo and Noel 2012). Finally, the Reopen movement did not congeal in the same way that the Tea Party did and had less impact in traditional political venues such as lobbying and candidate endorsement (Karpowitz et al. 2011). The movement's imprint was more clearly resonant in federal policy toward COVID-19 and in social behavior.

In truth, it may be too early to assess the Reopen movement's full impact. The Reopen movement became part of the overarching COVID-19 denial movement, whose protests continued through the pandemic and whose long-term impact is uncertain (IREHR 2021). And the activists born in the movement have begun to shape other emerging policy battlegrounds, such as book bans (Harris and Alter 2023). We imagine that over time, the activists in the Reopen movement affected vaccination rates, voting behavior, and trust in government, but are unable to assess those possible effects. We hope future researchers will map those legacies.

3 Methods and Data

Our research approach combines digital ethnography, computational linguistics, and econometrics. While unusual, this synthesis allows to document the movement's origins, growth, institutionalization, and radicalization in ways that are more difficult using a single method. Figure 1 displays a timeline of data collection, key events, and stages of the Reopen movement.

3.1 Digital Ethnography

Scholars are increasingly studying politics using data generated online. Facebook's dominance in the world of social media means that it has been the

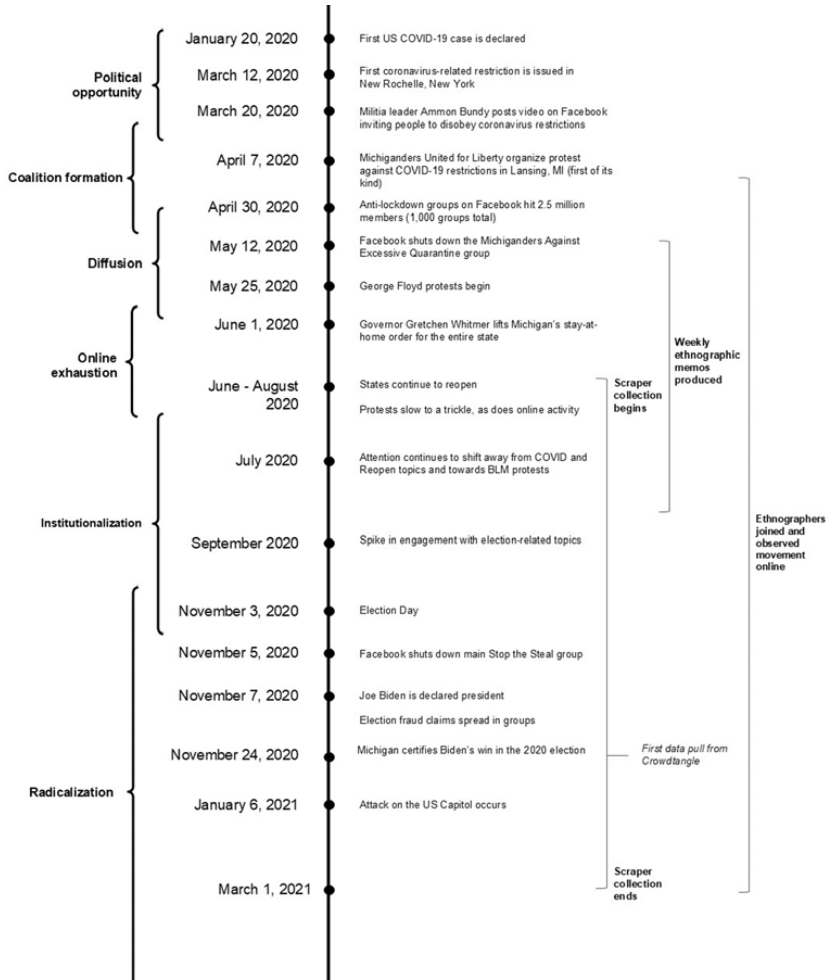


Figure 1 Stages of the Reopen movement and data collection

site for a bevy of ethnographic research (see Dalsgaard 2016 for an overview). The basic principles for the virtual field are similar to the non-virtual field, with researchers increasingly highlighting the porous boundaries between the two (Beneito-Montagut 2011). Many have found that online social networks are representative of offline relationships rather than being a derivative variant (e.g., Bisbee and Larson 2017). In sum, scholars are increasingly recognizing the value and necessity of using the Internet as an ethnographic field site.

We immersed ourselves in the Reopen movement in order to ascertain the meanings that members attributed to their reality (Martiny 2020; Simmons 2016). Two of us joined hundreds of Facebook groups, monitored the posts

on a daily basis over the course of one year, and, during the early period, produced weekly memos documenting the major topics of debate, discussion, as well as changes over time. As with offline ethnography, priorities for our digital ethnography included paying detailed attention through observation; immersion through participation; systematic modes of questioning; careful attention to the ethical challenges of studying people whose online activity might expose them to harm if publicized offline; and thinking critically and systematically about sources (Dalsgaard 2016). We adhered to those principles but did not participate in the same way as offline ethnographers due to ethical concerns about interventions in a radical movement; we never interacted with members of the Reopen movement. All names of activists were anonymized for their protection with the exception of prominent public figures like Garrett Soldano and Jennifer Darling, whose public activities are exempt from the necessity of anonymity. We took screenshots of especially contentious or popular posts as well as the resulting comments and recorded the number of “likes.” We watched streaming videos, such as Garrett Soldano’s livestream from protests, and joined the “watch parties” for President Trump’s news conferences. As a result, all quotes are recorded here verbatim, including the typos and neologisms that helped us to appreciate the lifeworld of Reopen activists.

3.2 Generalized Data Collection

We scaled up this ethnographic work by systematically collecting posts and comments from hundreds of Reopen Facebook groups using a procedure described in the following. Previous studies of Facebook groups have typically relied only on data from posts because Facebook’s CrowdTangle tool only allows the collection of post data. The addition of comments data is a vital contribution since comments include the contributions by everyday group members. In all Facebook pages and many groups, posting privileges are granted only to administrators, making the contents of posts a narrow and restrictive indicator. Moreover, when CrowdTangle returns post data, it assigns the group name to the author field, rather than identifying the user who created the post. Instead, when we perform author-level analyses, we rely on the comments data. Especially in public groups, comments can evolve in directions not anticipated by group leaders who control posting privileges, making comments a powerful measure of how the discussion has evolved over time.

We began our exploration of posts and comments by using Facebook’s CrowdTangle tool to download all posts from 399 public groups and pages identified by the ethnographers and a list provided by the Institute for Research

and Education on Human Rights. In addition, we joined ninety-three private groups and used a proprietary tool to collect the text of posts within these groups. We then collected the comments attached to a random sample of public posts. We used the same procedure in private groups. Since most comments appeared on high-engagement posts, we made the decision to limit sampling to posts that had received many comments. In private groups, we set the minimum threshold at six or more comments. In public groups, where the volume of posts was larger, we set the minimum threshold at twenty comments. We took rigorous steps to protect the anonymity of users while also ensuring that each distinct user could be tracked over time.

Previous studies on Facebook data have focused on posts. Our data includes both posts and comments. The ability to post in a group is controlled by group administrators, and Reopen groups differ from one another in the share of members who had permission to post. In many groups, only administrators or a small selection of users have the ability to create new posts. In other words, only a few users have the ability to set the discursive agenda by introducing a new topic to the group. Because posting privileges are controlled by administrators, we can treat posts as representative of the views of administrators and a guide to what they consider important. Users with posting rights are, in effect, elite users with significant agenda-setting power. Comments are very different. In Reopen groups, most users had the ability to comment on posts. The modal user lacked posting rights but had commenting rights. Far more than posts, comments indicate what group members writ large have to say. To the extent that posts and comments use similar language, we can assume that group elites (posters) and rank and file (commenters) are in alignment with one another. To the extent that they differ, we can see this as a gap between elite- and non-elite preferences within the group.

Previous studies have focused only on posts because posts have historically been easy to collect. For many years, the CrowdTangle API made it possible for accredited researchers to collect posts from public Facebook groups. Comments were excluded from CrowdTangle. As described in the methodological appendix, collecting comments without an API is a laborious process done with browser automation tools running at human speed. The time spent collecting comments allowed us to distinguish between the behavior of elite users with posting privileges (most of whom are administrators) and ordinary users with only commenting privileges. This overcomes an important weakness of previous studies of Facebook behavior, where the choice to use only data from the API limits the study population to elite group members.

In total, the quantitative data collection effort yielded 760,158 unique comments from 293 public groups and pages, 131,944 unique comments from 93 private groups, 938,854 posts from public groups and pages, and 13,741 posts

from private groups. We saw 224,217 unique users either posting or commenting across all groups under study. The timeline of data expands from April 10, 2020 to March 15, 2021.

3.3 Text Analysis

We applied several text analysis methods to understand the contents of the posts and comments datasets, paying particular attention to the topics under discussion, the sentiment associated with these topics, and changes in both topics and sentiments over time. We used a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) procedure to categorize posts and comments into topics by keyword (Blei, Ng and Jordan 2003). This yielded nineteen topics and associated keyword sets. We then used this nineteen-topic model to classify all comments and posts in the corpus. The topic-classified posts and comments allow us to track the themes of discussion across groups and time. Table 1 displays the most prominent topics and the top words in each topic.

Table 1 Conversation topics between 224,217 Reopen activists

Topic	Words
BLM	police, black, matter, lives, white, blm, protest, cities, antifa, jail, protests, violence, arrested
Business	Business, money, businesses, pay, shut, food, tax, paid, owners, jobs, economy, unemployment
Conspiracy	media, china, fake, truth, story, military, communist, deep, corrupt, chinese, social, fox, lie
COVID-19	vaccine, covid, health, medical, vaccines, virus, doctors, fauci, gates, coronavirus, human
Election	Vote, election, voting, michigan, fraud, votes, voted, ballots, ballot, voter, mail, person
Health	Health, contact, local, continue, community, plan, response, officials, questions, decisions
Law	law, rights, court, constitution, government, emergency, laws, federal, legal, governor
Masks	Mask, wear, wearing, masks, mandate, store, stores, leave, mandates, walk, walmart, door
Michigan	whitmer, michiganders, nevada, quarantine, excessive, lol, shit, stupid, ass, reopenoc, yep, fuck
National Politics	trump, president, biden, democrats, joe, house, remember, democrat, dc, america

Table 1 (cont.)

Topic	Words
Protest	sign, recall, city, petition, rally, support, event, protest, patriots, bring, beach, signs, town, friend
Religion	freedom, god, stand, love, fight, family, truth, evil, church, word, pray, tyranny, friends, speak
Reopen	county, reopen, governor, california, newsom, colorado, san, diego, restaurants, board
Schools	Schools, kids, children, parents, teachers, child, students, education, district, learning, months
State Politics	ohio, governor, email, dewine, house, indiana, senate, john, overreach, district, action, senator
Tea Party	government, america, country, control, power, fear, americans, lives, usa, agenda, history

Topic models identify clusters of words that appear together in a text corpus. The topic model used here presents the words most associated with one another. After clustering words into distinct topics, we named the topics based on our reading of the originating posts and comments.² Words sometimes appear in multiple topics, as with the word “protest,” which appeared frequently in the topic we named “BLM” alongside words like “police,” “black lives matter,” and “antifa” as well as in the topic “Protest,” which included terms like “rally,” “patriots,” and “recall.” Despite the overlap, the BLM and Protest topics are clearly distinct. They contain largely different words and, as we show later in the Element, the word clusters to which they correspond appeared at different times in the text corpus. The Protest topic was characteristic of the first waves of Reopen discourse in April 2020, when the groups were organizing demonstrations against lockdowns. The BLM topic was characteristic of the post-exhaustion period in June and July 2020, when Reopen group members criticized racial justice protests. The content of topics and the periods of time in which they enter the post and comment corpus allow us to track changes in group discourse over time.

Discussion topics are only one of the important elements of online discussions. Sentiment – the tone of discussion – matters as well. We characterized the tone of discussion in Reopen groups using Google’s Perspective API to classify posts and comments along seven sentiment attributes: Severe Toxicity, Identity Attack, Profanity, Inflammatory, Spam, Threat, and Insult. The Perspective API returns

² Two topics contained miscellaneous filler words and were excluded from substantive analysis, and two topics were merged due to substantive overlap.

a score between 0 and 1 on each attribute for each comment or post run through it. We make extensive use of the Severe Toxicity attribute in this study as prior works have found that metric to be reliable and less prone to false positives than other metrics (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021a, 2021b; Papasavva et al. 2022). Severe Toxicity is “A very hateful, aggressive, disrespectful comment . . . very likely to make a user leave a discussion.” Importantly, the Severe Toxicity attribute is less sensitive to misclassification than other measures of anger and toxicity. It also ignores uses of profanity with positive valence. We ran random samples of posts and comments through the Perspective API (the full corpus exceeded API limits), then calculated monthly, weekly, and daily averages for each resulting attribute score. The resulting scores allow us to track how sentiment differed across groups, topics, and how it evolved over time.

To understand how Reopen movement discourse evolved over time, we take two complementary approaches. First, we examine daily changes in Facebook posting volume (posts plus comments) in each state-linked group. We use a data-driven method to identify key turning points in posting behavior. Specifically, we apply a changepoint detection algorithm that scans the posting time series for sudden increases or drops in activity (Zhang et al. 2017). Each changepoint marks a moment when the level of online discussion shifted sharply, signaling a possible shift in engagement, either among incumbent or new group members. Second, we pair this activity data with daily counts of group members to assess how the movement grew – or stalled – over time. Because group membership changes more gradually than posting, we simply plot the number of members over time to detect bursts of recruitment or signs of stagnation. Throughout, we compare these trends to a timeline of key events identified by our ethnographic research team to understand what may have prompted changes in online behavior.

3.4 Panel Data Analysis

We construct several state-level panel datasets that allow us to trace the co-evolution of online and offline Reopen movement activity. We aggregate posts, comments, and membership numbers across all Reopen groups within a given state and time period. We supplement this with time-varying data on the content of posts and comments. We then relate high-frequency changes in online Reopen movement activity to changes in offline pandemic policies and social behavior and within the state. These include (i) offline Reopen protest activity as reported in the database collected by the Crowd Counting Consortium, (ii) social distancing among residents of the state as inferred from granular cell-phone movements reported in the Google COVID-19 Community Mobility

Reports, and (iii) changes in state-level lockdown policies reported in the comprehensive Goolsbee and Syverson (2021) database. Using descriptive event studies and state fixed effects regressions, we characterize the trajectory of online Reopen movement mobilization as the pandemic evolved throughout 2020.

In all of our state-level analysis, we view the content of Reopen group activity within the state as reflective of residents' attitudes within the state, even though some members may reside elsewhere. As detailed in what follows, this proves to be a reasonable assumption inasmuch as online and offline mobilization co-move within states over time in systematic ways that could only be rationalized through significant online participation by local residents.

3.5 Our Scraper and the Limitations of CrowdTangle

Social media data are an increasingly important source of information about human behavior (Ledford 2020). Because social media sites like Facebook allow, and often encourage, users to discuss their beliefs, the contents of users' posts and comments can be used by researchers to classify those users' attitudes. Facebook post data has been used to estimate the political ideology of Facebook users (Bond and Messing 2015). It has been used to describe the discursive contents of Facebook communities (Ma and Stahl 2017). And it has been used to show how community behavior in a Facebook group can change over time as members work to maintain a particular political line within the community (Mascaro, Novak, and Goggins 2012). A large body of work demonstrates the value of social media data for descriptive social science.

Whether social media data can be usefully deployed to test social science theories developed for the study of offline behavior, however, remains an open question. Recent research suggesting that ties on social media often reflect real-world ties is a sign that online and offline worlds overlap enough that it can be reasonable to apply existing social science theories to online communities (Bisbee and Larson 2017). A growing body of work relying on mobile phone location data to study protests further suggests that the things that happen on social media do not stay on social media, making social media an important site for organizers of real-life protests (Rotman and Shalev 2022). The combination of geolocated social media posts with mobile phone movement data is especially useful for both estimating the size of protests and for understanding when social media groups do prompt activity in the real world (Sobolev et al. 2020).

Most current research on the Facebook platform relies on the CrowdTangle API. CrowdTangle is an interface for collecting user engagement data on Facebook posts. It is used for the following public content (i.e., posts),

analyzing levels of engagement with particular accounts and content types over time, and monitoring trends in content and sharing patterns. The platform is marketed to social media managers, journalists, TV producers, and researchers (CrowdTangle 2022). CrowdTangle provides the contents of public Facebook posts, the page or group on which the post appeared, the number of interactions (comments, likes, reactions, or shares) the post received, and a list of public pages and accounts that shared the post. Because it is not an advertising tool, CrowdTangle does not provide impression and reach metrics.

Since it was made available to academics, replacing Facebook's Python API, CrowdTangle has been widely used by scholars and journalists. A frequent research use has been to study the spread of Covid-19-related conspiracy theories (Broniatowski et al. 2021; Bruns, Harrington, Hurcombe 2020). The typical methods used in these papers are to first identify groups of interest using a keyword, the presence of a particular link, or to identify groups manually through a process of digital ethnography, then download all posts surfaced by CrowdTangle for analysis. This can be done widely, with the intent to follow the evolution of a particular topic, as with Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe (2020) use CrowdTangle's broad keyword search capacity to surface all posts in public groups containing references to pandemics and 5G technology, then characterized phases of discourse within the posts it found using content analysis. The technique can also be used to identify groups, then characterize the ways these groups discussed the topics and how they differ based on observed user behavior. Thus, Ayers et al. used CrowdTangle to find all public groups in which links to a medical journal article on mask-wearing were shared. Once they had identified the groups, they used the CrowdTangle tool to download all posts in the groups. They then carried out analyses of post sentiment and link-sharing behavior clusters. When paired with prior knowledge about groups, the technique can also be used to understand differences in discourse between groups that are already expected to be distinct from one another. The data surfaced by CrowdTangle, once downloaded, can additionally be used to study post reach (engagement) and to categorize the topics present in the posts, as was done in Boberg et al.'s (2020) analysis of the different frames used by mainstream and alternative media in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. A similar approach was used by Rebello et al. (2020) to characterize the behavior of state-backed media pages written for consumption outside of the media company's home country (i.e., English-language *Russia Today*).

CrowdTangle has several important limitations that make it insufficient for studying how communities on Facebook behave. The most consequential limitation is that CrowdTangle does not provide access to comments on posts. In many groups, comments outnumber posts by two orders of magnitude. The

lack of access to comments means that CrowdTangle data can be used to analyze the behavior of people with posting privileges in a group, but cannot be used to characterize what a community is talking about or how it is discussing content that has been posted. A second limitation of CrowdTangle is its coverage. CrowdTangle will not surface posts from any closed (“private”) group, or from any account in a public group that has placed a location restriction or age restriction on their content. One of our most important areas of inquiry was in differences in discourse between open and closed groups; the CrowdTangle tool allows insight only into the public groups, and then only into posts by users with posting privileges who have imposed no age or location restrictions onto their posts. Because many Reopen groups are connected to states, some of them appear to have location restrictions.

Finally, the CrowdTangle API uses a black box algorithm to surface posts. We found that what a user sees on a page can differ substantially from what CrowdTangle surfaces when it is sent a request for a page’s post history over the time range visible to a user scrolling down the page. The differences between what users see and what CrowdTangle delivers may be connected to conditions like age and location restrictions, but they may not be – CrowdTangle’s API is not interacting with Facebook’s user-facing algorithm in the same way that users do, and so CrowdTangle data is not always representative of what users see. We are not the first people to note missing data in CrowdTangle downloads – in August 2021, thousands of posts related to the January 6th storming of the US Capitol disappeared from CrowdTangle (Scott 2021).

The collected limitations on CrowdTangle mean that it is an insufficient tool for characterizing the behavior and discourse of Facebook communities. CrowdTangle can tell researchers what is posted in a public group or on a public page, but it provides no insight into the words of users who post comments and limits our view of group content to what administrators and the few other users who receive posting privileges have chosen to present. Comments are critical to understanding an online community. We therefore chose to develop our own tools for collecting and analyzing comments.

Collecting comments is essential to understanding what Facebook users experience and how they behave. It is even more important when we consider the different kinds of communities that exist on Facebook. Facebook allows two distinct types of communities, which are often thought of interchangeably as “Facebook groups.” These communities are, first, pages, and second, groups. A page is a Facebook profile for a specific organization or public figure. Pages are almost always public, and the set of people who can post on them is limited to page administrators (Facebook 2025). Importantly, when a post appears on

a page, the post is attributed to the page, not to a specific user. Every post on a page has the same username attached to it – the name of the page.

Groups are Facebook communities of the traditional sort, usually built around a common interest. They are intended for discussion in the form of posts and comments. Some groups are public, others are visible only to members of that group. Groups vary in how widely they disperse posting privileges. In some Reopen groups, only a few users could originate posts, while in others, any member could originate a post. In groups, posts are associated with the user who posted them. This means that it is possible to differentiate between different users' posts in a group – something that is impossible on a page. Most groups allow commenting on all posts by all group members.

At the level of a Facebook group or page, most of the text material that appears will be in the form of comments. The high ratio of comment text to post text and the relatively closely held privilege to post mean that any analysis of posts alone is fundamentally incomplete. Most users have the ability to comment; the ability to post varies widely across groups.

To accurately characterize the discourse taking place within Facebook communities, researchers ought to collect both comments – the only form of open-ended interaction available to most users – and posts. Facebook's tools for researchers, in particular, the CrowdTangle API, only allow access to posts. Post data is insufficient to understand what is going on in a Facebook community, and it provides a window into only a small number of users. We supplemented post data with comments data by building a web scraper to collect posts while preserving user anonymity.

The scraper was written in Python and relied on the Selenium suite of browser automation tools. Its behavior mirrored that of a real user who is scrolling through a page and frequently clicking on links to expand comment threads. The scraper operated in three steps. First, it opened a new browser instance and logged in to a Reopen page. Once at the page, the scraper copied any comments it could see, clicked any "see all comments" links that were currently visible, and copied the contents of the visible comments to a spreadsheet. It then scrolled down the page and repeated the process on any subsequent comments.

In public and private groups, the scraper behaved slightly differently. In public groups, the scraper used post URLs derived from CrowdTangle as the starting point for its scrape. The scraper collected all comments associated with a specific post, then moved on to a different post in the CrowdTangle data. In private groups, there is no CrowdTangle access. In these groups, the scraper

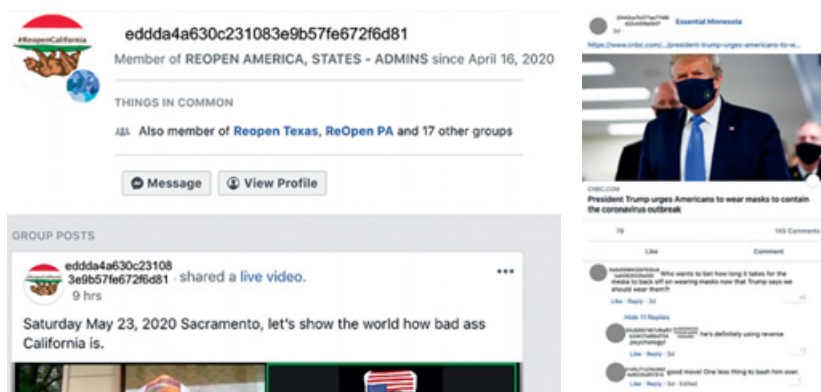


Figure 2 Protecting user anonymity using Facebook data

Note: An example of a post (left) from an administrator with administrator privileges in multiple groups. Right, an example of a post with comments from many ordinary users.

simply began at the top of the page and scrolled down. The private group scraper collected both comments and posts.

At the end of the session, an R script was called to anonymize the comments. The anonymizer replaced all text in username fields and all names that appeared in the “[name] replying to [name]” sections of comments with a hashed string. This step removed all identifying information from the data while still allowing tracking of individual-level commenting behavior. Figure 2 provides an example of this process.

Our approach has two important advantages over existing methods used to study Facebook. First, it allows us to collect comment data, something which is otherwise inaccessible to researchers. Second, our scraper behaves like a real user. The process of scrolling and clicking is the same process by which users experience the Facebook site. They do not experience it as the results of an API.

One important reason that the scraper was successful is that it moved very slowly. Unlike the CrowdTangle API, which can process tens of thousands of posts in a few seconds, the scraper could collect a few dozen comments each minute, and only a couple of hundred comments each hour. Moving faster ran the risk of overwhelming servers and triggering a Facebook block. In order to collect the comments, we ran the scraper from November 2021 through March 2022. Until Facebook chooses to allow CrowdTangle or another research API access to comment data, collection at human speed will be the only way to gather data on Facebook comments.

Our approach also yielded an important piece of information about the CrowdTangle API. During the testing phase, we ran the most basic version of the scraper – the version that simply scrolls down a page, clicking on “see more” comment links – on a handful of public groups that we had also collected with the CrowdTangle API. This version of the scraper collected posts as well as comments. We found that there was very little overlap between the posts collected by our scraper and the posts yielded by CrowdTangle when restricted to the date ranges of the posts collected by the scraper. In other words, our scraper, which sees what a human would see, encountered very different content from what Facebook’s official researcher API presents as the content of that group. CrowdTangle is a tool for studying user engagement, not a tool for characterizing groups as a whole. Our experience indicates that the differences between what the CrowdTangle API presents to researchers using it and what users experience are very large. Further research should be done into what the CrowdTangle API is delivering, as many studies of Facebook rely on this API.

We tested the differences between what CrowdTangle returns and what a page-crawling person would see by examining the Michiganders Against Whitmer page from February 15 to March 30, 2021. CrowdTangle returned 379 posts; the page-crawl run on March 30 down to the end of the visible page yielded 356 posts. None of the posts overlapped across the samples.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study enacted strict protocols to protect human subjects.³ To protect the anonymity of posters, we stripped user data from posts by replacing the username fields with a one-way hashed character string. To protect the anonymity of commenters, we used the same hash algorithm on the “commented” and “user commented on” fields. To further protect anonymity, we then hashed any text string that resembled a username, even if it appeared outside of the username fields. This had the unfortunate side effect of hashing some mentions of public figures being discussed in the posts, when those public figures’ names were formatted in ways that resembled a username. We then discarded all file versions that contained un-hashed username or username-like text. We preserved user anonymity through this procedure (there is no key list connecting usernames to hashes, and hashes are not reversible), but it is possible to follow user activity over the course of time, as each distinct user is uniquely identified within the data.

³ This study received IRB approval from Boston University (5649X), Harvard University (IRB21-0271), and the University of California, San Diego (#210359XX).

4 The Reopen Movement: Cycles of Contention in the Digital Age

Since the cycle of protest is organized in stages, this section will follow that same pattern while attending to the online dynamics of the movement after offline protests were exhausted. The cycle, and our analysis, begins with a political opportunity (Tarrow 2011, 197–198).

4.1 Political Opportunity

Today, Garrett Soldano is a failed candidate for Governor of Michigan. But in March 2020, he was a chiropractor raising a family in the Kalamazoo suburbs. He had not donated to any state or federal election campaigns, and his media appearances stem from his time as a linebacker at Western Michigan University and his book, *God's True Law: A Parent's Guide to Raising Successful Children* (Soldano 2013). The shutdowns hurt his small business, and in frustration, on April 7, he created the group “Michigander’s Against Excessive Quarantine” (MAEQ). The group grew to 50,000 members within hours, 150,000 in days, and reached over 375,000 before the end of the month. Soldano unexpectedly tapped into a well of frustration toward Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, which poured out in thousands of posts and comments about the crippling economic effects of the shutdowns, a perception of fraud by the state, and comparisons between the founding fathers and activism today.

Soldano’s connection to grassroots activists put him into contact with political elites. He spoke with Republican state senators who suggested he launch a petition to repeal a 1945 law that allowed Governor Whitmer to issue executive orders without legislative approval (Mogelson 2020). Activists from Michigan United for Liberty (MUL) connected to established organizations like the Michigan Conservative Coalition, founded by a Republican state lawmaker (MUL, April 12, 2020; Stanley-Becker and Romm 2020). Members of the Facebook group called on Soldano to run for governor or to launch a recall petition, and they offered to form a security force made up of police officers, ex-military, and “just some good old rednecks” (MAEQ, April 13, 2020). Others supported the April 15 protest organized by MUL, including celebrating the presence of armed militias, and shared instructions on how to contact legislators.

The Reopen movement was born of a political opportunity and entrepreneurial activism (Tarrow 2011, 33, 201). It attracted new activists like Soldano and another member of MUL who said, “Never been to a protest before. Always been too busy working. I’ll be at this one.” (MUL, April 7, 2020). Social movement theorists have long viewed such moments as transformative. These

are “moments of madness” when “dreams become possibilities” (Zolberg 1971, 196). Like in the former Soviet Union, political mobilization brought new elites to power, and old elites adapted (Beissinger 1996b, 408). These are also communities in formation; group members shared tips for how to apply for unemployment funds, provided emotional support for members with family in nursing homes, and offered sympathy to those who lost loved ones to COVID-19. One viral comment from May 6th illustrates the combination of suffering and activism born in this moment: “Don’t write on here much but I have to today. 6am this morning my Dad died from covid-19. My heart is so sad. I have not seen him for 6 weeks. He was in a nursing home. I loved my Dad and I have been crying all Day. I am so mad at this Damn virus. We the people have to stand strong for our rights. Might [sic] Dad would want that” (MAEQ May 6, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for citizens to mobilize on a large scale (Rohlinger and Meyer, 2024).

In addition to madness, these are moments of innovation. MUL and MAEQ tested mobilizing frames, such as #DriveOutTyranny, #BalanceTheRisk, #FreedomOfReligion, and #OpenMichigan. They also innovated tactics such as the April 15 #OperationGridlock car protests in Lansing (Koopmans 2004; Tarrow 2011, 203). #OperationGridlock diffused to other protests, such as the Freedom Convoy in February 2022, led by truckers in Ottawa, Canada, which later inspired the Freedom Convoy to Washington, DC, in March 2022. Another innovation emerged in the religious sector where pastors defied lockdown orders and held church services (Post 2020). Such acts of defiance became symbols: one poster wrote: “So proud of my 80 year old ‘compromised’ dad who still goes to get groceries, orders take out & whose church is holding drive in services where I am pretty sure the stubborn old Swedes are hand shaking and hugging!” (MAEQ May 9, 2020). One poster said they were not worried about police crackdowns because: “We go to church with several local officers. They said they would not respond to calls about shutting down our services.” And another noted “... in my state, sheriff [sic] don’t have to adhere to state laws, my sheriff deputized our church and called it a meeting of his deputies, now we can have church, even though we did anyways” (ReOpen USA May 11, 2020). These examples of innovations became symbols for the movement and gained the notice of elites and the media.

4.2 Coalition Formation

By the end of April 2020, the online Reopen movement had grown to over 1,685,000 grassroots members and built a coalition with prominent elites. Does such elite involvement make this an Astroturf movement? Prominent scholars

have suggested the Reopen protests were an exercise in elite mobilization (Ellis 2020; Illing and Skocpol 2020). More theoretically, scholars have long argued that established political organizations are generally opposed to the entry of new political actors into new institutions (e.g., Gamsen 1968, 20). McAdam (1982, 62) writes “elite involvement in insurgency will be motivated more often by a desire to control, exploit, or perhaps even destroy the movement than to assist it. Thus, the expectation is that external involvement is likely to prove detrimental rather than advantageous to the movement.”

We show in this section that the involvement of elites in the Reopen movement is evidence of a coalition rather than Astroturf mobilization. Such coalitions are not new; other mobilization waves have led to elite adaptation and recruitment along established lines of interaction (Beissinger 1996b, 408; McAdam 1982, 44). In the case of the Reopen movement, elites recruited activists connected to Tea Party organizations and helped organize and structure the protests in order to lobby the Trump administration from above and below. Facebook offered an unmatched tool for mobilizing grassroots frustration during the pandemic-induced recession. The structure of the groups – geographically and locally anchored – mimicked the structure of the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). The pandemic offered establishment organizations an opportunity to attract new activists and to enlarge their base.

The work of Brooker and Meyer (2018) provides us with useful language for describing the coalition contained within the Reopen groups. We can describe the simultaneous formation of these groups as an attempt to form a within-movement coalition that is issue-based and combines many local coalitions into a broader national coalition. Its organizational form is a set of Facebook groups connected to one another by their name and, in some cases, by shared creators, but left to function on their own after their coordinated formation. The Facebook group approach allows national mobilization in response to a (shared) local policy.

Reopen activists thus went into a coalition with left- and right-wing libertarians, anti-vaccine activists, militias, and Tea Party activists. One of the MUL organizers, Wendy Darling, criticized the Republican Party and identified herself as a libertarian. But she supported the Republicans in the Michigan legislature who were opposing the governor’s shutdown orders because “an enemy of my enemy is a friend” (Burns 2020). Similarly, a MAEQ member said, “I am not a republican or a democrat. Although I am with you in feeling the quarantine is becoming to [sic] much” (MAEQ 2020, April 13). Even more common were Republican activists using the opportunity to expand their influence: “Cops are not the bad guys. They are part of the community, but are bound by policy, orders, and an oversight board. Our Democratic Government heads

are our problem. Fix that. Vote red!” (Reopen USA May 11). That pattern was happening across the country as hundreds of Facebook groups sprouted up with similar names, goals, and mobilizing frames. Major themes focused on liberty against tyranny, standing strong in the face of fear, and the right to work.

Elites were mobilizing, too. The most visible organizations were Convention of States, FreedomWorks, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and Tea Party Patriots. These established organizations benefited from appearing to be aligned with grassroots activists (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 9–10). Key elites included the conservative economist Arthur Laffer, Mark Meckler of Convention of States, and Stephen Moore, the founder and coordinator of the Save Our Country Coalition, which in April 2020 articulated a set of five goals: immediately reopen the economy, cut federal spending, use tax cuts and deregulation to propel economic growth, locate the pandemic response in the states rather than the federal government, and prioritize individual liberties over public health (Vicenzi 2020). ALEC coordinated a sign-on letter from policy elites and elected officials to urge President Trump to “reopen the economy” (Armiak 2020). FreedomWorks created a planning guide for ReOpenAmerica rallies, including nonpartisan signage and ostensibly personalized slogans like “Let me work” and “Let me feed my family,” and the consensus hashtag #Reopen America (Wall 2020).

Such elite mobilization shaped the grassroots. Facebook groups originally organized around other frames changed their names. For example, “Minnesotans Against Excessive Quarantine” became “Reopen Minnesota,” “End the Lockdown Georgia” became “REOPEN GA,” and “Americans For Opening Business!” became “Reopen USA.” Protestors in North Carolina, Illinois, and Ohio used the FreedomWorks signs and slogans. By the end of April, there were over 1,000 Facebook groups dedicated to reopening states from lockdown. Some of the largest groups, Minnesotans Against Excessive Quarantine, Ohioans Against Excessive Quarantine, Pennsylvanians Against Excessive Quarantine, New Yorkers Against Excessive Quarantines, and Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine were created April 14–15 by the Dorr brothers, conservative activists with a long history of profiting from political mobilization (Stanley-Becker and Romm 2020). Those five groups alone grew to over 270,000 people by the end of April 2020. Convention of States registered the website openthestates.com on April 14 and created public forums for every state, linked to their respective Facebook groups such as Reopen California, REOPEN NC, ReOpen PA, Reopen USA, and ReOpen PA. Those five groups had over 327,000 members by the end of April and were mobilizing the grassroots for protests, letter writing, and phone calls to elected officials.

The elite coalition also devoted resources toward its goals. FreedomWorks spent thousands of dollars on Facebook advertisements asking people to sign petitions focused on payroll tax relief, making federal aid conditional on reopening states, and advocating reopening the economy (Facebook Ad Library 2020). None of those advertisements steered people to join the Reopen groups, but instead used the issue to build membership and pressure elected officials. State-based institutions affiliated with the conservative State Policy Network – The Mackinac Center for Public Policy (MI), Center of the American Experiment (MN), Badger Institute (WI), Grassroot Institute (HI), Georgia Center for Opportunity, the Idaho Freedom Foundation, and the Goldwater Institute (AZ) – likewise placed advertisements asking people to sign petitions or join their mailing lists to advocate reopening. A few advertisements did promote offline protests, such as the Michigan Conservative Coalition advertising a May 2020 “Operation Haircut” protest on the Capitol lawn, inspired by Michigan activist Karl Manke’s refusal to close his barber-shop. The elite coalition may have invested in mass mobilization on Twitter, too; nearly half of the accounts supporting the Reopen protests came from bots, troll-like accounts, and other inauthentic users (Babcock and Carley 2022). President Trump also amplified the protests. His April 17 tweets to “LIBERATE MINNESOTA,” “LIBERATE MICHIGAN,” and “LIBERATE VIRGINIA” supported protesters in states with Democratic governors.

Organizing the movement through Facebook groups had a significant impact on its trajectory. Initially, these groups were formed by conservative activists who successfully established a coalition of individuals concerned about the issue of lockdowns. This coalition included Republican Party activists, left and right libertarians, parents of school-aged children who yearned for school reopenings, and business owners and workers who were worried about the financial consequences of lockdowns. The lockdowns provided a shared sense of threat, leading them to coalesce into a coalition organized around the online groups created by Republican activists. Because the coalition was formed in response to a specific political threat, parts of the coalition broke off when, in the summer 2020, many lockdowns were reduced, and national political discourse turned toward racialized policing.

McCammon and Van Dyke (2010, p. 310) define political threats as “sufficient conditions for coalition formation.” They explain that in response to such threats, coalitions can form without preexisting social ties and despite differences in beliefs. The evolution of the Reopen groups serves as a paradigmatic example of this process. The political threat was the anti-Covid lockdowns. These groups consisted of disparate ideological groups without preexisting social ties, united around the removal of the lockdowns. However, once this

goal was achieved, the lack of ideological alignment and existing social ties ensured that the coalition could not sustain itself. After summer 2020, only the ideologically aligned portion of the groups remained – those who embraced the Reopen movement as a Republican Party-oriented social movement. Our findings suggest a trajectory for coalitions that form in response to political threats: First, a broad coalition of individuals who share an interest in ending the threat is formed. Subsequently, an exodus occurs, leaving space for one faction of the coalition to carry the label. In the case of primarily online groups, this faction often forms the bulk of discursive activity. For scholars interested in understanding what happens after a coalition forms, the trajectory of the Reopen groups provides a valuable example.

In sum, ethnographic observations suggest that the Reopen movement consisted of a coalition of established organizations and grassroots activists, rather than being an entirely elite construct.

4.2.1 Empirical Tests of Elite or Grassroots Influence

In order to test whether the movement was driven by grassroots mobilization or elite-driven, we draw on four additional types of evidence: (1) the political affiliation of group moderators and administrators, (2) the behavior of Facebook activists with multigroup membership, (3) coordination of group activity on Facebook, and (4) the substantive content within the Facebook groups.

First, in order to assess whether the Facebook groups were driven by established Republican activists, we searched through all the groups and identified 365 administrators and 240 moderators that could be investigated for preexisting political affiliation; their identities were verified using publicly available data. From that sample, we used the Federal Election Commission (FEC) Individual Contributions database to determine whether they contributed to Republican political campaigns. The overwhelming majority did not have preexisting political ties. Of the 345 searched in the FEC database, by far the most, 272 (79 percent), did not donate to any federal campaigns. Sixty-two of the 345 (18 percent) donated to Republican organizations and campaigns, such as WinRed and the NRSC. Fourteen admins and moderators (4%) donated specifically to Trump, including through the Make America Great Again PAC and the Trump Victory Fund. Twenty admins and moderators (6 percent) donated to other campaigns, which included Democratic and third-party campaigns; most of the donations in this category went to Bernie Sanders, Tulsi Gabbard, and libertarian candidates. Since 7.7 percent of American voters donated to a political cause in the United States by the end of 2020, we can interpret these data to mean that Reopen administrators and moderators were

about twice as likely to donate as the average person (FEC 2021). They were active in politics, but most were not Republican elites. In sum, while elites helped coordinate protests, the movement drew on everyday people, bringing in newcomers to politics. Leaders like Soldano thrived on the support of their new community, with one person noting, “I’ve heard it said that before this crisis is over, heroes will emerge and take up the cause of liberty, men and women who never expected to be placed in a situation like this. Garrett, you are one of those” (MAEQ May 1, 2020). This community grew on Facebook, and like other social movements, no single segment of society propelled the campaign (Tarrow 2011, 198).

Second, we investigated the discursive profiles of single- versus multigroup users. Because some early activists, like the Dorr brothers, opened several Reopen groups in a short period of time, we suspect that multigroup users were more likely to be elite actors, while single-group users were more likely to be authentic grassroots activists. Given this assumption, we investigated similarities and differences in behavior across the two types. We expected that multigroup users would steer the content toward the policy priorities of the elite coalition.

Overall, we found very few multigroup members (3.5 percent) and very little cross-posting (5.2 percent). We found some multigroup users who appeared to be inauthentic and would post the same content in multiple Reopen groups, but this was rare. When crossposting did occur, it was sharing a news article on a small scale (2–3 pages) or trying to steer traffic to e-commerce platforms. This evidence suggests, again, that elites helped set up some of the groups, but then intervened little or were simply swamped by the overwhelming number of idiosyncratic, uncoordinated, individual users. Grassroots activists did most of the posting and commenting. Figure 3 bears out these quantitative differences in posting frequency by single- and multigroup users from April 2020 to March 2021. Moreover, with few exceptions, single- and multigroup users exhibited similar trends in the topical content of their posts (see Figure 4 based on the topic model categories from Table 1) and the political bent of the linked media articles therein (see Figures 5a and 5b). None of these figures bear the hallmarks of Astroturf interventions where elite, multigroup users lead group activity in terms of frequency and topical coverage.

Third, we joined REOPEN AMERICA, STATES-ADMINS. We expected this administrator’s group to host discussions of coordination and content. The group administrator described the group by noting: “Please invite the other admins of your group to this one so we can all start getting America reopened!” (April 13, 2020). But activity in the group remained limited. Most posts did not receive comments, and there was no sharing of content, ideas, or coordination.

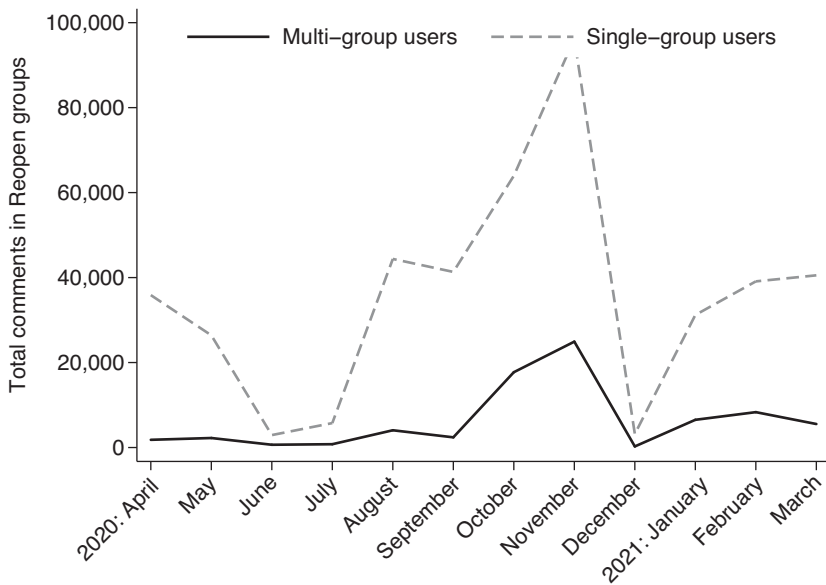


Figure 3 Posting frequency of single and multigroup users

Notes: This figure plots the total number of posts and comments by single- (gray dash) multi- (solid black) group users.

In fact, there was some evidence of frustration with using Facebook as a platform for mobilization. On April 20, one administrator shared a form to collect contact information to prepare for a move to other platforms; there was no response from the other administrators. In fact, repeatedly over the year that we monitored the groups, the administrators tried to move their members to other platforms such as mewe.com and parlay.com, where they could more effectively influence the group members instead of being subject to individualized algorithms and geographically delineated group boundaries. One of the ironies of the movement was that a structure that enabled rapid mobilization and connection hindered long-term communication and coordination, a challenge common to digitally networked movements (Tufekci 2017). Coordination across states failed due to the geographically anchored groups, their local concerns, and the individualized algorithm that shapes engagement on Facebook.

A fourth indicator of grassroots influence is that the content of the movement's posts and comments diverged from the policy priorities of elite organizations like Convention of States. Of those priorities – opening the economy, cutting federal spending, tax cuts and deregulation, state responses to COVID,

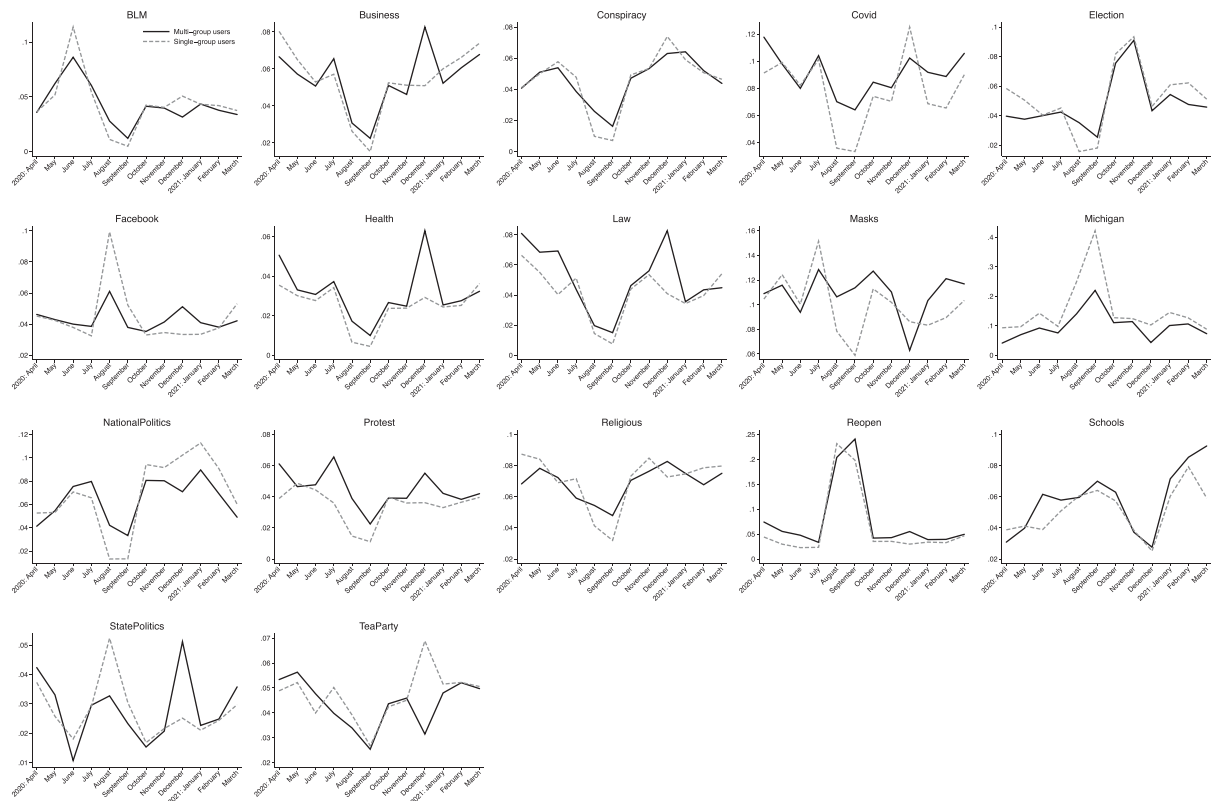


Figure 4 Topic comparison of single- and multigroup users

Notes: This figure plots the monthly evolution of the topical content, based on the LDA topic model in [Table 1](#), broken down by single (gray dash) and multi- (black solid) group users.

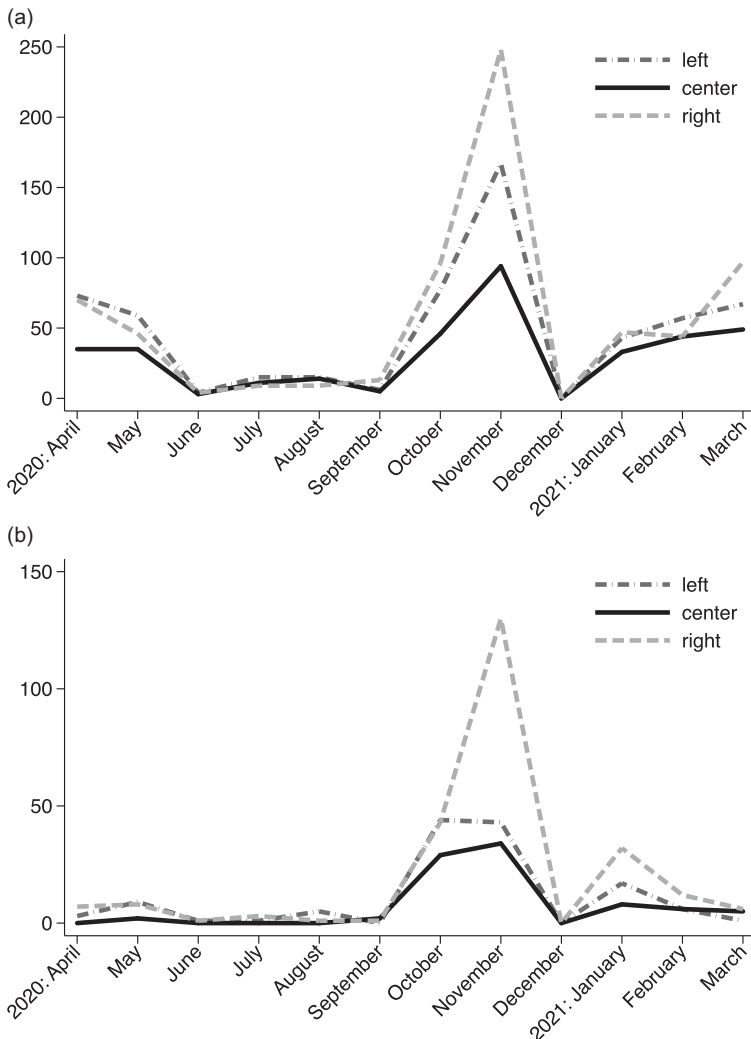


Figure 5a and 5b Link comparison of single- and multigroup users

Notes: These figures plot the total number of news articles, broken down by political lean, posted by single (left) and multi (right) group users. The political lean is obtained from Media Bias Fact Check and AllSides Media Bias Ratings.

and prioritizing individual liberties over public health – only reopening the economy, and the prioritizing of individual liberties were among the top ten most discussed topics in the groups. As Figure 6 demonstrates, during the first three months of the movement, the most common discussions focused on masks, COVID-19, media coverage of the virus, and religion. Figure 6b

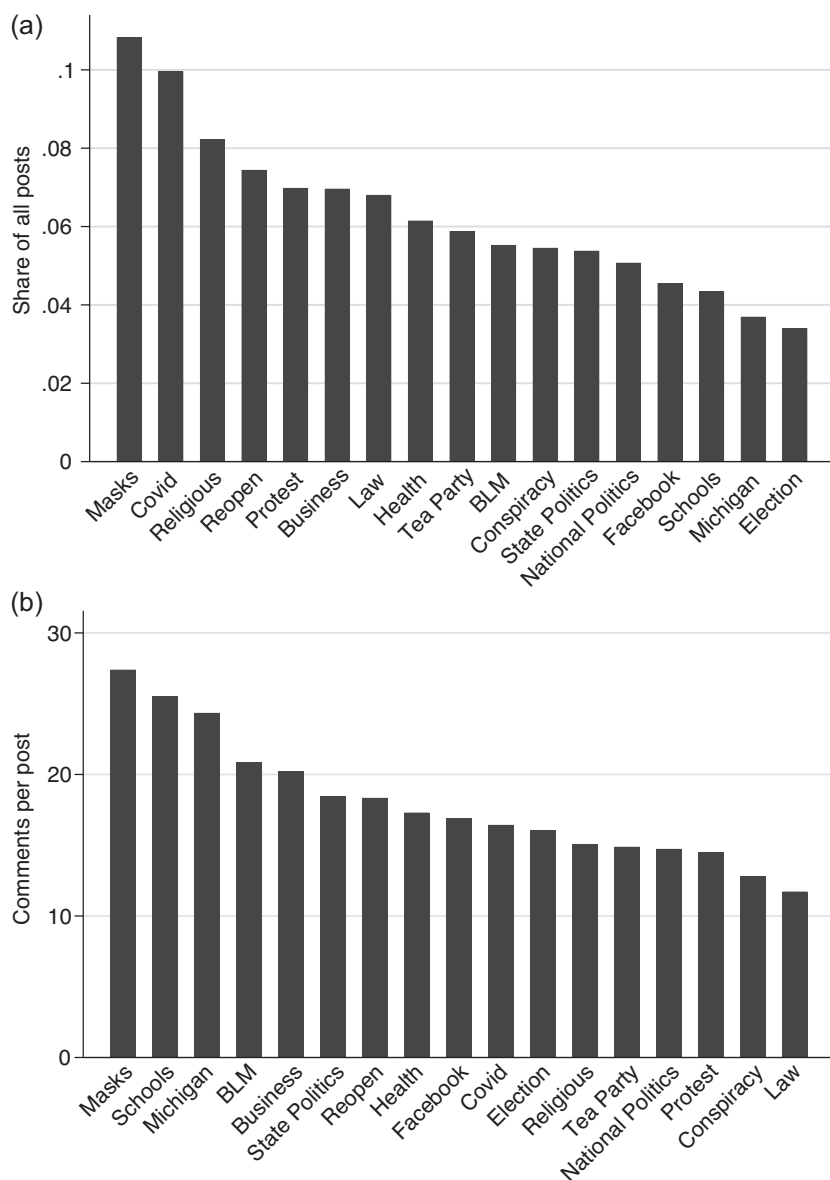


Figure 6 Topic model for first three months of the movement

Notes: This figure shows, for the first three months of the movement, the proportion of posts (a), the average number of comments received per post (b), and the average number of likes per post (c) corresponding to each of the topics identified by the LDA topic model from Table 1.

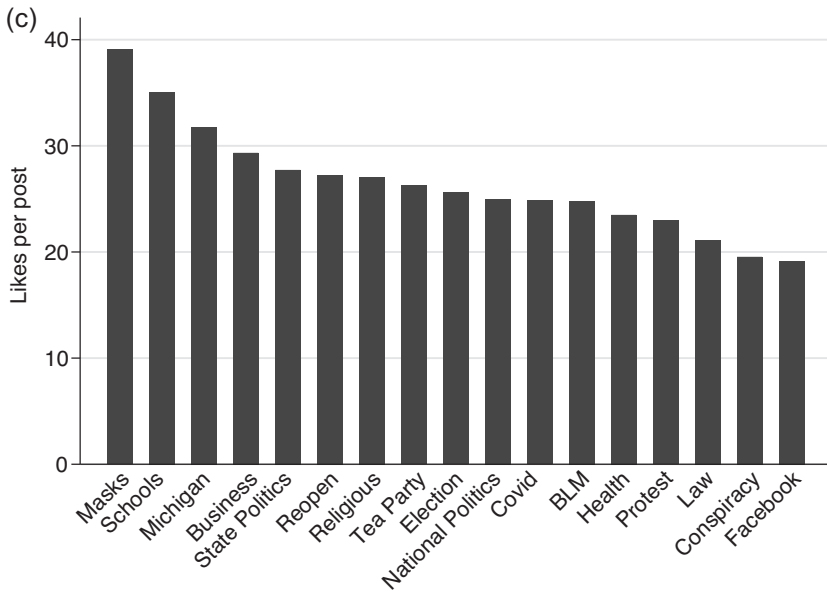


Figure 6 (cont.)

shows that posts on masks and schools were by far the topics that elicited the most comments, and Figure 6c shows that “likes” by topic were greatest for topics related to masks, businesses, and schools. While the elite organizations would have liked the Reopen movement to focus on taxes, reopening, federal spending, civil rights, and state’s rights, the masses were more inclined to focus on masking policies, health, and religion. Over time, the divergence grew even more profound as the movement diffused and radicalized.

Taking stock, during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, a coalition of grassroots and elite organizations coalesced into the Reopen movement. Evidence from inside the movement suggests that the masses provided the energy and enthusiasm, while elites helped with framing, coordination, and publicity. The structure of Facebook and the heterogeneous nature of activists’ demands limited the degree to which elites could steer the movement toward specific policy goals, and, in practice, the movement diverged fairly quickly from the policy preferences of the elites.

More theoretically, this period suggests that the authentic-versus-Astroturf binary is unhelpful in an age of digital activism; even movements with substantial elite influence can take on a life of their own. Participation in the movement shaped the lives of the activists involved, and they shifted the movement toward policies that diverted from the elite organization’s preferences. The campaign to

reopen the states from lockdown left behind a social movement infrastructure that elites could not control, one that was simultaneously effective for mass mobilization and detrimental for movement coordination. A brief act of intense political mobilization left echoes that remained audible for years afterward, such as in the support for the “Stop the Steal” campaign, the January 6 insurgency, and local book bans. Like the Tea Party, the Reopen movement birthed a new generation of activists.

4.3 Diffusion

Diffusion refers to the “flow of social practices among actors within some larger system” (Strang and Meyer 1993: 488). In the [previous section](#), we showed how the coalition diffused the movement through the creation of similarly named and framed Facebook groups, pushed the campaign out to their network of activists, and helped the movement to coalesce around a master frame. In this section, we highlight another aspect of diffusion: How offline protests relate to online activity and movement growth? While protests can be a meaningful indicator of movement strength (Chenoweth et al. 2020), offline protests may be just as important for the online community they build, helping grow the Reopen movement from hundreds of thousands of members into a community of millions.

To assess this claim, it is important to understand that the Reopen groups constituted a meaningful community to their members, much like within other social movements (Simmons 2016; Tufekci 2017, ch. 4). Members supported each other and offered sympathy and prayers to anyone directly affected by COVID-19. In fact, in the first three months, religious content was the third most common in the movement after masks and COVID-19 (see [Figure 6a](#)). For example, on May 5, a member of MAEQ posted, “I lost a friend today. Sorry of [sic] this is not the right place to post it, but you guys are the only people who would understand. My friend of 14 years, my best (and only really) friend posted a long rant yesterday how ‘uneducated people’ are crowding in Walmart and not socially distancing.” The post went on to say her friend supported social distancing restrictions and stay at home orders, while she did not. In response, other members offered loving support and prayers for healing. “I experienced the same with a ‘friend’ of 9 years. It hurts! There was something there I didn’t see. I still pray for her and ask God every day to touch her and to help her find peace . . . ” Another recounted how they, too, had lost close friends because of differing responses to the shutdowns: “My oldest son and I will probably never speak again. He is a left extremist and just because I think for myself, he called me names and more.

I don't want to be dictated to by the government or anyone else!" (MAEQ, May 5, 2020). The Reopen community provided meaning and purpose during a frightening time in Americans' lives.

Offline protests helped to build this meaningful community. Take, for example, the April 15 #OperationGridlock protest. In the days preceding it, there was an increase in the number of posts in MAEQ and MUL as the activists prepared and built momentum. Posts that day read: "Today is the day! #OperationGridlock" and "Get up here before you can't 🤔 people are already showing up!," and "WOOD TV8 is on site. ❤️❤️❤️." Members posted photos to share with those unable to attend in person and celebrated their achievement: "I didn't get to take a lot of pictures today. Was doing a lot of press, lives, & getting people signed up for our mailing list so they don't miss the rest of what we're working on. Great job Michigan!!!!" The day ended with congratulations and anticipation of the next meetup: "WE MADE HISTORY TODAY WITH #OPERATIONGRIDLOCK, MICHIGANDERS!!! 🤗" and "👏👏👏 Can't wait for the 30th!!!!" (MUL April 15, 2020).

Moving beyond the case of Michigan, we explore how online and offline activity unfolded across states during the early months of the pandemic, focusing on April and May 2020. Our analysis follows two steps. First, we identify changepoints in total daily posting volume for each state, based on the combined activity of all state-linked Facebook groups. These changepoints signal sudden shifts in online engagement that may reflect key moments in the movement, including local protests or other high-profile events. Second, we compare the timing of these changepoints with the dates of offline Reopen protests, using data from the Crowd Counting Consortium.

Figure 7a shows the results: The black line tracks daily post and comment volume, diamonds indicate offline protests, and circles mark the detected changepoints in online activity. Some patterns suggest a clear link between offline protests and online engagement. For example, in California (late April) and Massachusetts (early May), protests appear to be followed by sharp increases in postings. In other cases, the relationship is less obvious, and some changepoints correspond to only minor changes in activity. To better separate meaningful shifts from background noise, we explore this relationship more formally using a regression framework.

In Figure 7b, we relate posting volume to offline protests in the previous four days, conditional on state and day fixed effects. The binned residual scatterplot in panel (1) reveals a stark positive relationship: posting in online Reopen groups rapidly increases in the wake of offline protests. Each additional protest

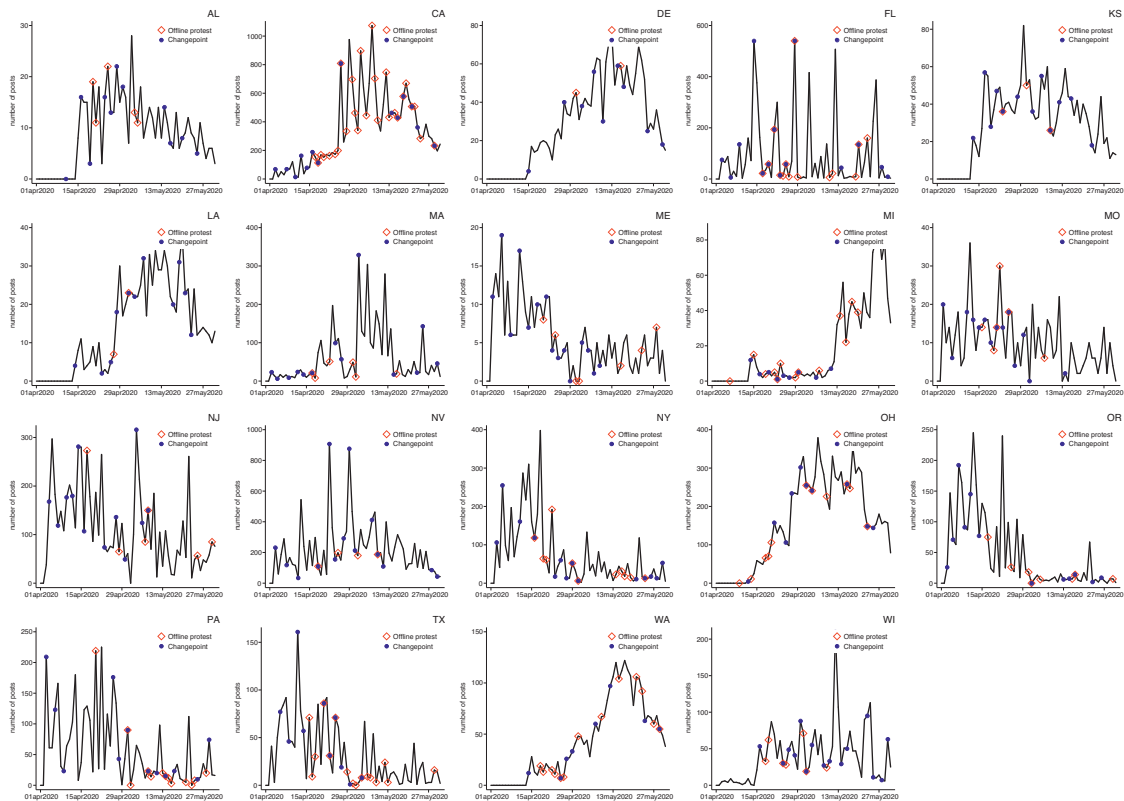


Figure 7a Offline protests and posting volume

Notes: This figure plots, for the state-linked Reopen groups, the daily evolution of posting volume (black line), the date of offline Reopen protests in the state from the Crowd Counting Consortium (hollow diamond), and change points based on the Zhang et al. (2017) approach (circles). The analysis spans the eight-week period from April 1 to May 30, 2020, during which protests were at their peak as states were enforcing lockdowns.

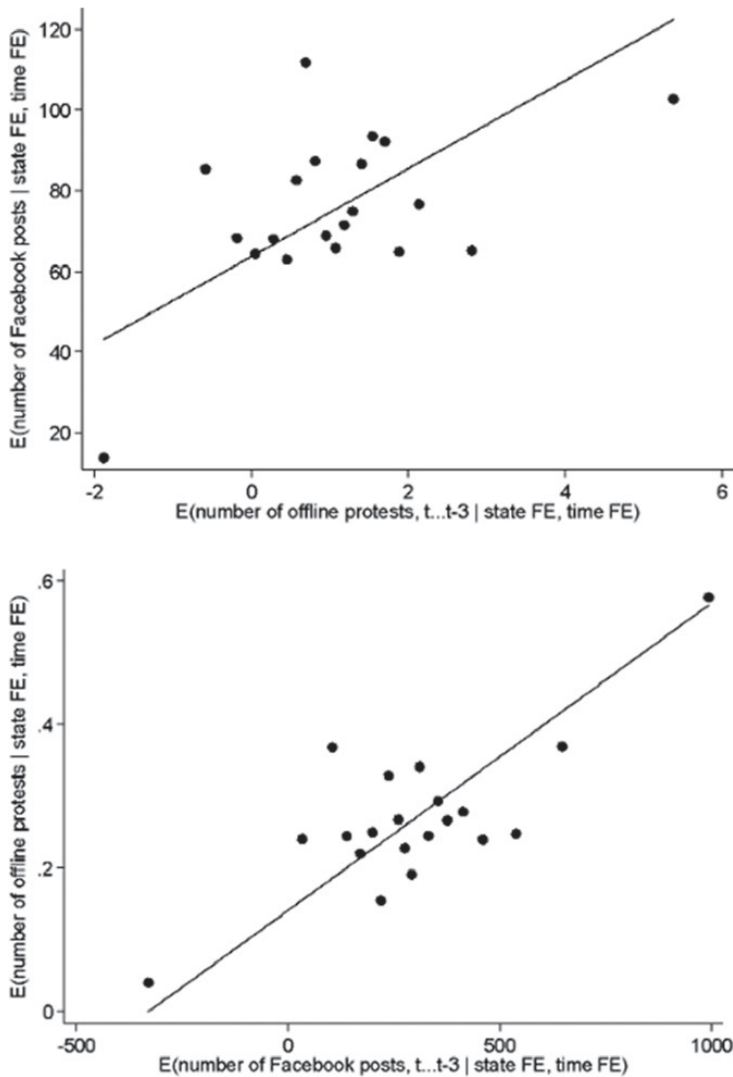


Figure 7b Offline protests and posting volume

Notes: These figures plot the partial correlations between the daily number of Facebook posts and the daily number of offline protests in the nineteen state-specific Reopen groups. The graphs highlight the bidirectional nature of this relationship, where in (a) we regress the number of Facebook posts today on the number of offline protests in the last four days, and in (b) we regress the number of offline protests today on the number of Facebook posts in the last four days. The dots and lines are based on bin-scatter regressions on a state-by-day panel where we residualize the regressor and outcome by fixed effects (FE) for state and day. Each dot in the graph represents the average within a bin of residualized observations, where the bins are of equal size. The analysis spans the eight-week period from April 1 to May 30, 2020 during which protests were at their peak as states were enforcing lockdowns.

in the last four days is associated, on average, with ten additional posts today, relative to a mean of seventy-five posts per day over the two-month sample period in this analysis. Of course, this is merely correlational and may well be driven by confounding variation in offline pandemic policy or other shocks. Indeed, the ethnographic evidence points to bidirectional causation or complementarities: Online activity helps mobilize for offline protests, which in turn garners additional engagement online. Panel (2) of [Figure 7b](#) provides evidence of this other direction, showing that growth in posting activity in the past four days is strongly associated with the occurrence of offline protests. Going from zero to the mean number of posts in the past four days is associated with 0.13 more protests today, relative to a mean of 0.25 protests per day over the sample period.

Together, these patterns are suggestive of a strong link between offline and online movement growth and have implications for social movement theory. Social movement theory theorizes protests as an indicator of movement size, and as a mechanism for influencing public opinion and elected representatives, building movement cohesion, and disrupting routines in order to press for political change (Piven and Cloward 1977; Tarrow 2011). And yet, in a digital age, we need to think about offline protests as having other functions. In a digital age, protests may be vehicles for building an online social movement. Offline protests increase the volume of activity by online activists. They provide a focal point for building the movement and keeping its attention, precious resources in an age of distraction. Given the fragility of digital movements, offline protests may help them to cohere. Additionally, when offline activity is exhausted, that online community may be useful for subsequent campaigns, such as the 2020 US presidential campaign for Donald Trump. Mapping the offline exhaustion of the movement is the task of the [next section](#)

4.4 Exhaustion

By the end of June 2020, protests slowed to a trickle. [Figure 8](#) shows this marked decline in offline protest activity from April 2020 through October 2020. Likewise, [Figure 9](#) shows the decline in online engagement following the first wave of protests and online mobilization. Views per post, a key metric for engagement, dropped dramatically from June to July, and again from July to August. It never approached June 2020 levels again. Tarrow (2011, 206) explains movement exhaustion as a product of fatigue due to the costs of activism, disillusionment, and internal divisions. In our setting, exhaustion stems from three factors: the end of lockdowns, the diffusion of protest activity

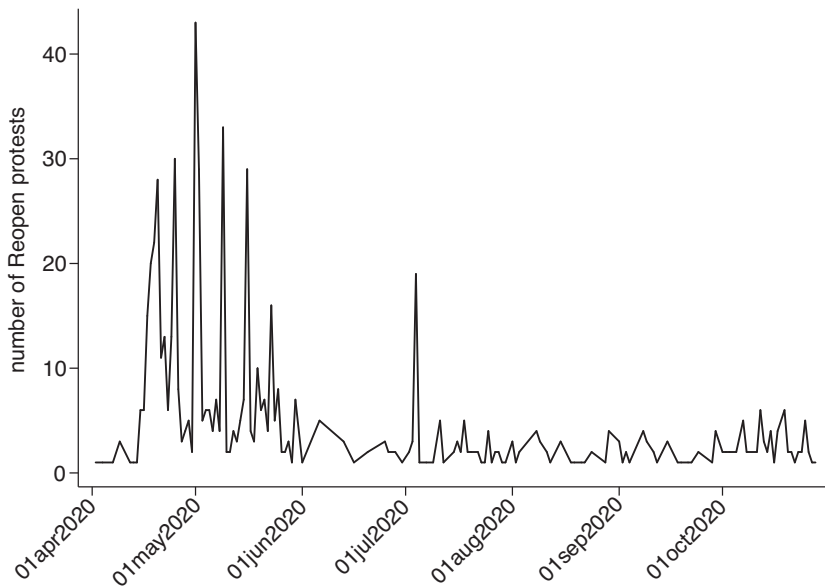


Figure 8 Number of offline protests

Notes: Daily Reopen protests, sourced from the Crowd Counting Consortium.

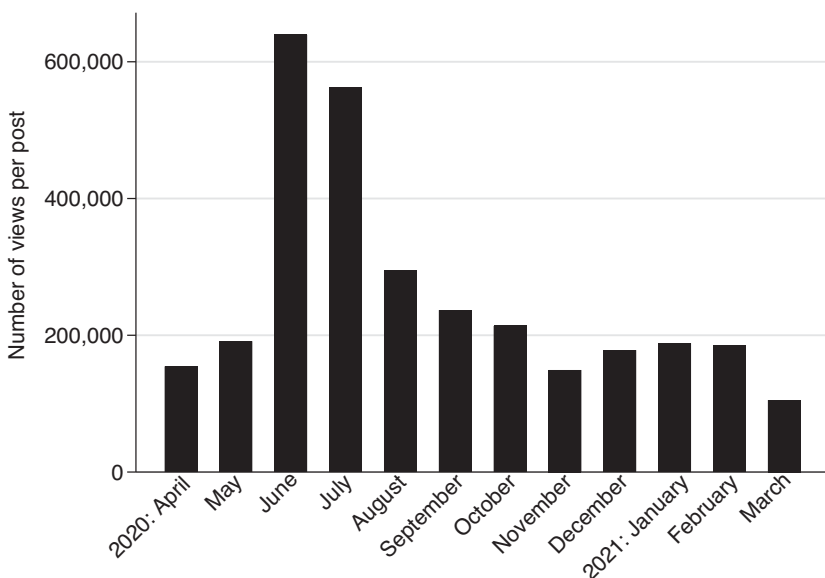


Figure 9 Views per post in Reopen groups April 2020–March 2021

Notes: This figure reports the average number of views per post in Reopen groups month by month during our study period.

during COVID-19 to the Black Lives Matter movement, and internal divisions about next steps.

The Reopen movement appears to have achieved its primary goal: pressuring states to lift lockdown restrictions. Figure 10a and 10b shows how group membership and posting activity evolved in relation to the timing of state-level reopenings. To capture this, we align each state-linked Facebook group by the date its stay-at-home order ended, using data from Goolsbee and Syverson (2021). We then plot the total number of group members and posts by days before and after reopening. Panel (a) includes all states in our sample, while Panel (b) focuses on the subset of states whose reopening dates fall within April and May – when our daily membership data are most reliable. Across both panels, we see a consistent pattern: Online mobilization builds steadily in the lead-up to reopening, then drops off sharply once restrictions are lifted. This clear before-and-after pattern underscores how closely the movement’s energy was tied to a specific political demand. The abrupt slowdown in activity following reopening is one of the clearest signs of the movement’s perceived success. As one administrator of Reopen Georgia wrote on June 2, 2020: “It’s time to close this group. We accomplished what we wanted weeks ago. This has become a forum for topics unrelated to our cause . . . Thanks everyone for contributing to the change we wanted before looters began their work.”

Second, protests diffused to other sectors of society, with the Black Lives Matter movement greatly overshadowing the Reopen movement (Chenoweth et al. 2022). The size of the BLM protests, the number of protests, and the duration of the BLM movement far exceeded the Reopen movement. Reopen activists became annoyed by the media’s swift pivot. One post in Californians Against Excessive Quarantine raised disbelief that the BLM protests did not lead to a spike in COVID-19 cases. Other members replied that the lack of a spike was evidence that the entire pandemic was a hoax (Californians Against Excessive Quarantine, June 26, 2020). Yet, many also expressed support and solidarity with protestors, at least initially. In regard to police brutality, one activist wrote, “I know this is excruciating and may be impossible for some to accept. But these are Trump’s troops. He is not on our side. This isn’t about protecting people, this is about control. I’m not saying that unrest shouldn’t be mitigated in some way. But this is the kind of authoritarian s*** that we rage against in the Socialist and fascist countries that we despise and fear. We should be more afraid of this than the virus for our children and families.” (RE-OPEN Louisiana July 19, 2020). Over time, however, sentiment shifted away from solidarity and toward opposition to BLM.

Third, internal divisions and shutdowns by Facebook hastened movement exhaustion. On April 13, UNCENSORED: Michiganders Against Excessive

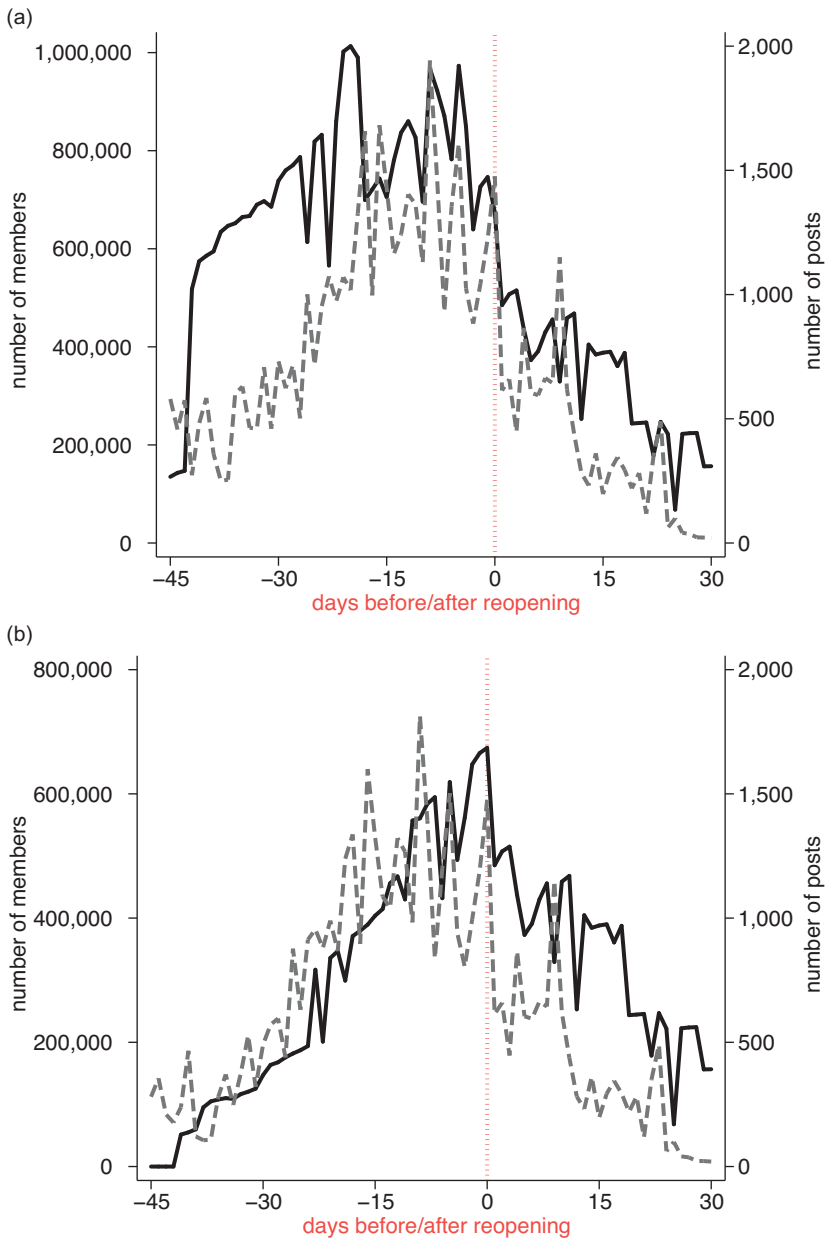


Figure 10 Membership and post volume before and after the end of shutdowns

Notes: These figures report, across all state-linked Reopen groups, the total number of members (black line, left y-axis) and the total number of posts (gray line, right y-axis) relative to the day in which the state-specific lockdowns were lifted (normalized to day 0). The analysis spans the eight-week period from April 1 to May 30, 2020 during which protests were at their peak as states were enforcing lockdowns. Panel (a) is based on all states, and panel (b) only on those states where the lockdowns ended by the end of May.

Quarantine was created as a splinter group from the original MAEQ due to the administrator's restrictions in posting. A May 11 story in the *Detroit Metro Times* documented threats of violence toward Governor Whitmer in four groups, including MUL; all four were then shut down by Facebook. On May 12, MAEQ was itself shut down after Soldano did a live video from barber Karl Manke's protest against shutdowns. MUL created new Facebook groups with the same name, but they never reached the same size. Likewise, on May 13, Soldano created a replacement page, "Stand Up Michigan," which grew to over 50,000 members before being closed again. As his 2022 election campaign developed, he shifted to a webpage off Facebook, and then to a more official politician page and has spent thousands of dollars on Facebook advertisements to try and recapture the visibility of MAEQ. Due to data limitations, we cannot say with certainty which of the groups voluntarily closed or were shut down by Facebook, but as of writing, most groups are no longer accessible. Although activity on Facebook decreased, the movement continued in a more institutionalized fashion as it transitioned into a focus on schools, vaccines, and support for President Trump.

4.5 Institutionalization

Institutionalization is "a movement away from extreme ideologies and/or the adoption of more conventional and less disruptive forms of contention" (Tarrow 2011, 207). Soldano's shift from activist to gubernatorial candidate is a prime example. The New Hampshire Reopen movement made this shift relatively early. An administrator used the group to recruit candidates to run for the State House on May 3, May 17, and again on May 26. On May 28, another administrator explained in detail the process to change party affiliation and run for state office: "We are planning to elect a slate of people who have supported the ReopenNH cause and want to end the governor's executive orders creating a State of Emergency, which is what has allowed him unparalleled and unrestrained power" (Reopen NH, May 28, 2020). That same administrator then posted a list of endorsed candidates after the primary, all Republican. Collectively, while engagement decreased compared to June 2020, the Reopen groups were still home to hundreds of thousands of posts and comments per month. And commenting frequency increased after the offline movement was exhausted (see Figure 13).

A similar dynamic was occurring nationwide. After offline protests ended, an online infrastructure remained with administrators and moderators able to push content out to millions of members. President Trump's support for the movement, his ties to the elite coalition, and his longtime trafficking in

misinformation dovetailed with activists' priorities. As a result, many of the groups became explicitly focused on reelecting President Trump, while others simply shifted content toward that goal and merged with the "Stop the Steal" protests that followed the 2020 US Presidential election. For example, an activist in South Carolina created  SURVIVOR'S OF SC  on April 11, 2020, then organized a protest in Columbia on April 25, and unsuccessfully tried to coordinate protest dates on the Reopen movement administrator's page. Over the next year that group changed names to REOPEN SC MAGA 2020 (June 9) and then PATRIOTS AGAINST THE DEEP STATE (Jan 13, 2021).

Figure 11 shows the change in focus of Reopen groups from April 2020 to March 2021 based on the topic model categories seen in Table 1. Several patterns stand out; we highlight two of the most important. First, we see clear attention shifting toward salient offline events, including the BLM protests in July 2020, which displaced some of the focus on COVID- and Reopen-related topics at the time. Second, and perhaps most notable, we see a significant shift in movement focus toward national politics around the November 2020 presidential election. This marked a turning point for the Reopen movement as it charted a new course closely aligned with the fate of President Trump.

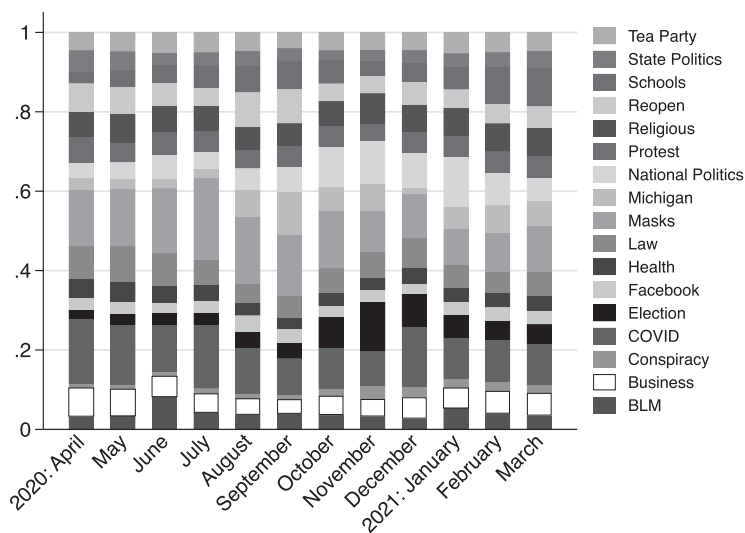


Figure 11 Topic model change over time

Notes: This figure plots the month-by-month evolution of the mix of posts across the topics identified by the LDA model in Table 1. This figure can be seen as a generalization, across the entire study period, of the topical coverage reported in panel (a) of Figure 4. The height of the colored bars in this figure reflects the share of the month's total posts classified as belonging to the given topic.

Support for Trump was not inevitable. On March 21, a member of #ReopenNY responded to an article saying Trump refused to reimplement lockdown orders for a second wave: “If I could believe him I would vote for him. But he is unworthy of belief” (Reopen NY, May 21, 2020). An activist at the April 15 car protest in Lansing said: “This has zero to do with Trump, and everything to do with governor overreach and personal liberties being infringed on in a massive way . . . For me, my reason for attending was simple: I’m on the verge of losing my small business because she [Gov. Whitmer] says I’m non-essential, despite being able to easily practice social distancing at work” (Public Post, April 15, 2020). Georgia Governor Brian Kemp began reopening relatively early, on April 20, and in response, President Trump said he disagreed strongly with reopening spas, tattoo parlors and beauty shops. A member of Reopen Georgia responded: “Ugh!!! I love my president, but leave us alone,” engendering numerous critiques of Trump, such as “I was going to vote for him. But now I am not going to vote at all.” “I am losing more confidence in trump every day. He has to be aware of the real numbers. Shame on him for not being honest with his fellow Americans.” “I’ll vote Libertarian. Jacob Hornberger! I voted for Trump but he lost my respect with this move.” “I agree, I’m very disappointed in Trump right now” (Reopen Georgia, April 22, 2020). Such critiques continued through April: “I’m with Kemp, never liked trump. Sadly he’s not qualified for the job and keeps contradicting himself” (April 30, 2020). Nationwide, activists expressed dissatisfaction with President Trump’s handling of the pandemic: “Listening to tRump’s daily briefings is a waste of time. The man can barely put a sentence together and has been clueless in getting the country prepared for what has transpired. Can’t wait until he’s gone and competent people are running the country again” (ReOpen California, May 1, 2020).

That said, more common was overlap between activists’ support for Trump, advocacy for reopening, and seeing all public health behavior as an individual decision. For example, an administrator for Arizonans Against Excessive Quarantine ran another group titled Celebrities 4 Trump. The April 20 Re-Open Maine rally in Augusta was hosted by Mainers for Trump/Pence 2020, Keeping America Great! (May 3, 2020). One of the screening questions for Nebraskans Against Excessive Quarantine of the People of Our United States was “Do you support our President Donald J Trump?” (May 5, 2020).

The institutionalization of the movement into the Republican Party and MAGA became clearer after online exhaustion. On August 11, a member of Reopen RVA! posted “Some say ‘if you just wear a mask, the state could open sooner’/ I say if you just voted Republican, it wouldn’t be closed” (August 11,

Reopen RVA!). The right-wing activist Clay Clark posted in Reopen Oklahoma that he was invited to sit in the press row for the June 20 Trump rally in Tulsa, OK (June 22, 2020, Reopen Oklahoma). Even when Trump advocated wearing a mask to contain the virus, activists made excuses for him rather than critique him: “He is doing it now so that there’s no excuse for people to go out and vote in person instead of mail-in voter fraud. It’s like a game of chess let’s see who wins” and in response: “exactly! He is so many plays ahead of them. Another win! Trump 2020” (Essential Minnesota, July 23, 2020).

One reason for institutionalization is that President Trump adopted movement priorities as federal government policy. Recall that the elite coalition advocated reopening the economy, cutting federal spending, using tax cuts and deregulation to propel economic growth, locating the pandemic response in the states rather than the federal government, and prioritizing individual liberties over public health. Trump’s policy became similar as he advocated reopening by April 12, 2020 so that churches would be open for Easter (Karni and McNeil 2020), delegated COVID-19 policy to the states, and tweeted support for protests in Michigan, Virginia, and Minnesota. Reports from inside the White House suggest that Trump ignored the policies advocated by his advisors and the CDC in favor of backing protestors in Michigan and Minnesota (Slavitt 2021). Protestors inside the movement reciprocated with support for the president: “Thank You Mr. President for acknowledging what has always been true CHURCH IS ESSENTIAL” (Stand Up Michigan May 23, 2020). In that respect, the institution adopted movement priorities, and the movement institutionalized.

As a result of institutionalization, the movement became increasingly partisan by the end of the summer. Figure 12 demonstrates this partisan turn using data on the ideological lean of news media to which Reopen members linked in their posts. Beginning in June 2020, we see a gradual shift toward right-leaning news media with a pronounced increase in November and December. By early 2021, that partisan tilt had swung back to its preelection levels, suggesting some reversion to the mean.

During that lead-up to the November election, the partisan turn in the Reopen movement could be seen across the political map. Figure 13 demonstrates that the surge in commenting activity in late-summer 2020 took place across America and especially in blue and purple states, where Reopen activism may have had the potential to sway swing voters in the lead up to the November election.

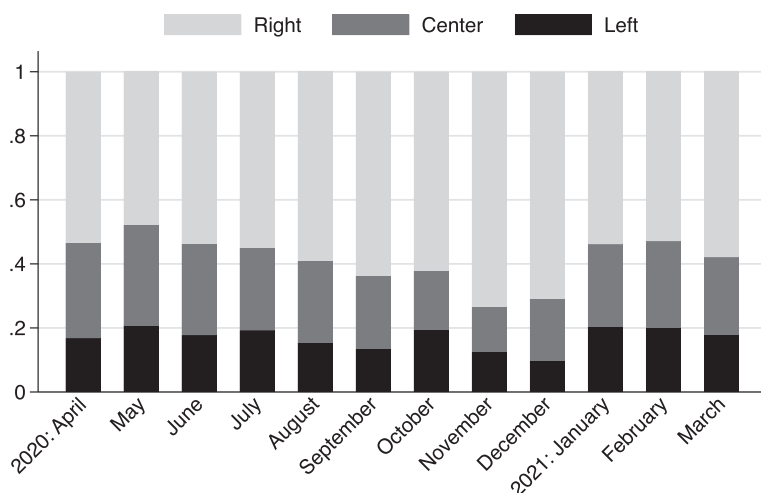


Figure 12 The movement's partisan turn

Notes: This figure plots the month-by-month evolution of the mix of ideological viewpoint data taken from Media Bias Fact Check and AllSides Media Bias Ratings. The height of the colored bars reflects the share of all news articles within the given month.

4.6 Radicalization

Radicalization is “a shift in ideological commitments toward the extremes and/or the adoption of more disruptive and violent forms of contention” (Tarrow 2011, 207). Social movement theorists argue that violence tends to mark the end of a cycle of protest as the movement declines, confronts the state, and smaller organizations at the margins try to outbid their competitors (Beissinger 1996b; Della Porta and Tarrow 1986; Eisinger 1973; Koopmans 2004; Tarrow 1989a). In our setting, radicalization resulted from integration with the Trump campaign, the reaction to BLM and female politicians, Facebook’s approach to content moderation, and more radical latecomers to the movement. In this section, we explore each of these hypotheses.

Integration with Trump. Toward the beginning of the movement, it was not obvious that Reopen activists would be pushing a pro-Trump agenda. Yet, some of these activists attended the January 6, 2021 protest at the US Capitol, and one was arrested. An admin of ReOpen Hawaii, Brooke McGowan, was present at the protests despite asking the Facebook group, on April 22, 2020, to “keep our posts party neutral.” She was also pictured supporting Black Lives Matter protestors on May 30, 2020. Yet, over time she shared more partisan content as well as pictures of Trump rallies and news from Breitbart, a far-right website. McGowan’s radicalization culminated in her attendance at the protests in D.C. Another example is an

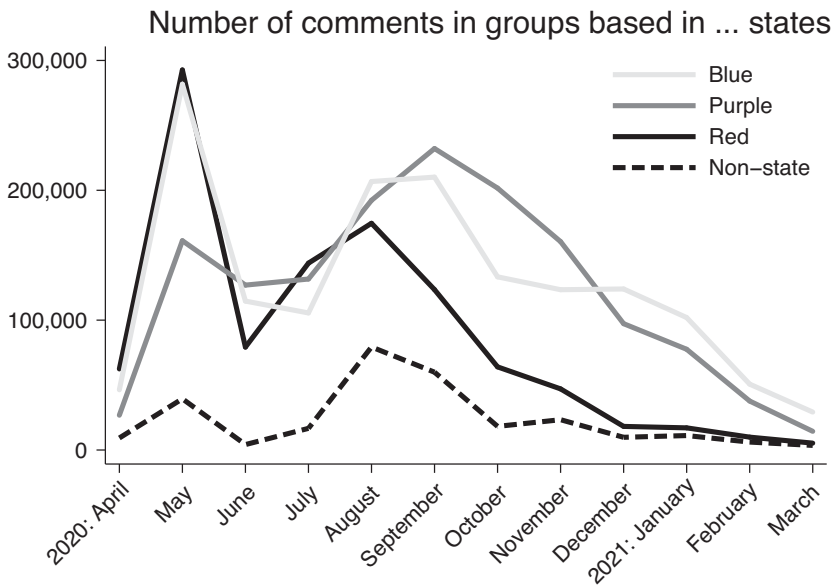


Figure 13 Comments over time by election leaning

Notes: This figure plots the month-by-month evolution of the number of comments posted in groups based in blue (Democratic), purple (swing), and red (Republican) states as well as national or non-state affiliated Reopen groups (gray). The state partisanship is based on the 2016 election. The red (Republican) state includes: Ohio, Kentucky, Kansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Utah, Alabama, Indiana, West Virginia, Missouri, Tennessee, South Carolina, Arkansas, and Idaho. The blue (Democratic) state includes: New York, California, Washington, Delaware, New Jersey, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Oregon, Massachusetts, Virginia, Maryland, and Rhode Island. The purple (swing) states include: Michigan, Nevada, Wisconsin, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Florida, Texas, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, and Iowa. Examples of gray (non-state) groups are “Reopen the country,” “Remove the caution tape,” “Americans against excessive quarantine,” and “No More Quarantine.”

administrator of New Jerseyans Against Excessive Quarantine, Rasha Abual-Ragheb, who was arrested, prosecuted, and convicted of parading, demonstrating, or picketing in a Capitol Building. Abual-Ragheb promoted petitions to recall Governor Murphy, was angry about the BLM movement, posted how “proud” she was to be a part of history after being part of the insurrection, and regularly interacted with other Reopen NJ groups. Both McGowan and Abual-Ragheb demonstrate how Reopen members joined the Trump campaign as the November election approached and radicalized alongside.

The most obvious indicator of integration was active mobilization inside the Reopen groups for the “Stop the Steal” campaign organized by political operative

Roger Stone with support from the Proud Boys militia and other far-right activists. That included repeated invitations for Reopen activists to go to Cobo Hall in Detroit, MI, to protest ballot-counting (Stand Up Michigan November 4, 2020). One activist tried to coordinate the campaign through Facebook: “Not long ago got off [sic] phone with Tim Griffin the attorney AT COBO HALL. If you are AT COBO hall, stay. If you are outside, just be a presence. Pray, take photos, take videos. PRAY. But do not plan on getting INTO the building tonight. You might. But you might not. Also – DO NOT believe any information you here [sic] from anyone else other than President Trump or official election personnel. Stop listening to rumors from the ground” (Stand Up Michigan to Unlock Michigan, November 4, 2020). Multiple activists in the Reopen movement were also active in Stop the Steal groups on Facebook. As the Reopen movement integrated with the MAGA movement, it radicalized.

We substantiate this trajectory by examining the sentiment of posts within the Reopen groups from April 2020 to March 2021. Using Google’s Perspective API, we characterize the text of posts along several dimensions: (severe) toxicity, obscenity, identity attack, threat, and inflammatory. [Figure 14](#) shows

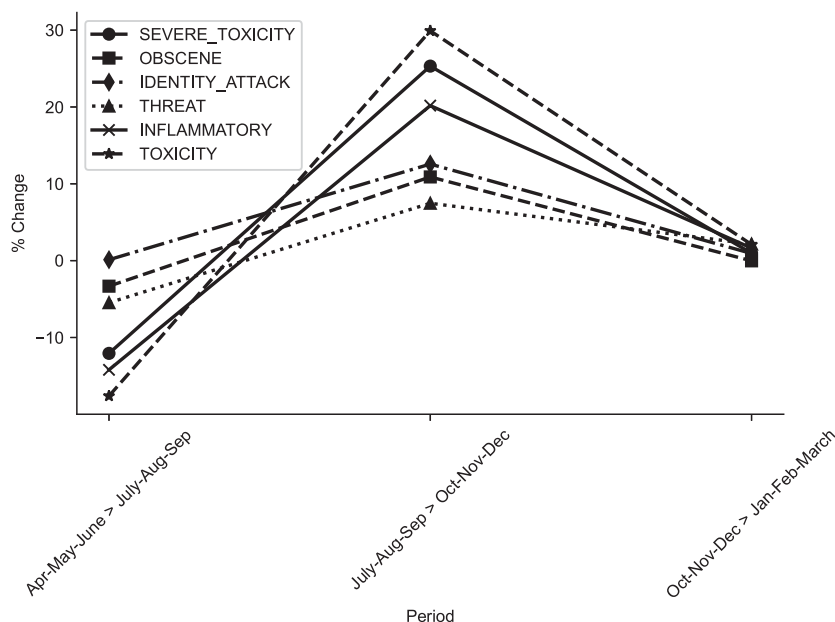


Figure 14 Toxicity peaks due to the 2020 US Presidential election

Notes: This figure plots the average within-person changes in sentiment across posts between the given three-month periods listed on the x-axis, spanning April 2020 to March 2021.

that conversations within the Reopen movement became more inflammatory and toxic in the months around the November election. This resonates with the partisan shift documented above and also with the ethnographic portrait of radicalization and entrenchment within the Trump campaign orbit. Radicalization occurred over time, but the most potent shift occurred not at the end of the cycle but rather in the interim due to political events.

Tarrow (2011, 206) argues that radicalization of movements occurs because the moderates drop out and the radicals remain. To test this, we examine levels of toxicity among those who stayed in the movement, and those who dropped out over time. Figure 15 shows support for Tarrow's view: in two different periods of the movement, we see a 2-percentage point difference in the toxicity of retained users compared to users who dropped out. Although small in absolute terms, this statistically significant difference suggests that

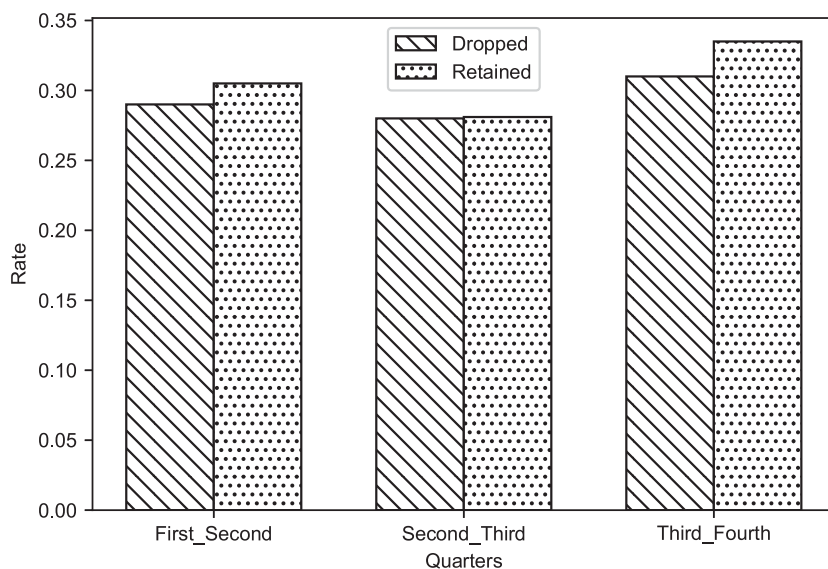


Figure 15 Moderates drop out of the Reopen movement

Note: This figure plots the *Inflammatory* scores of comments from users who dropped out and continued their activity in the platform in each of the respective three-month periods of the movement. For example, *First_Second* represents the transition from the first three months period of the movement (April, May, June), and the second three months period of the movement (July, August, September). Users are identified as dropped, if they had at least ten comments in the first three months of the transition period but were inactive (less than ten comments on the second period of the transition). We follow a similar heuristic to identify dropped and retained users on *Second_Third*, and *Third_Fourth*, where dropped users are users who were active in October–November–December but didn't record any activity on January–February–March of 2021.

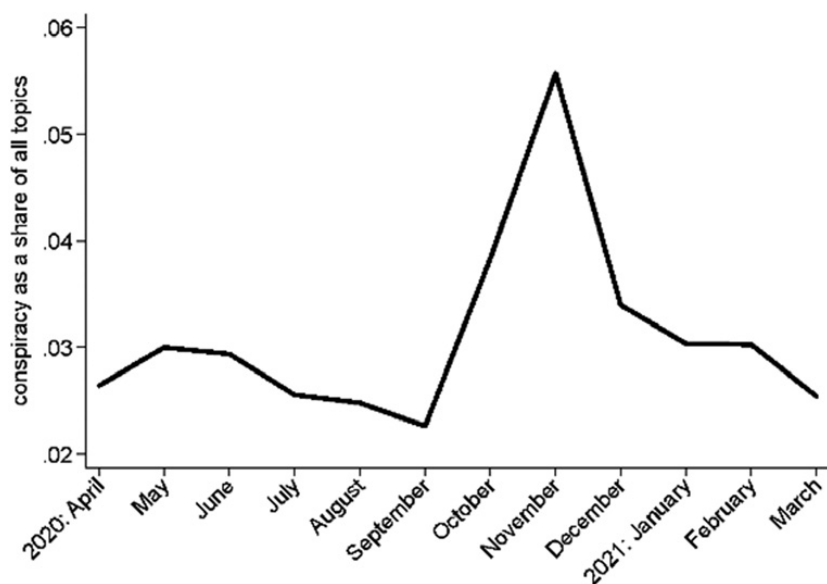


Figure 16 Composition of conspiracy-related discussion by month

Notes: This figure plots the share of posts falling under the conspiracy topic (see Table 1).

retained users are roughly 7 percent more toxic in their language than those who dropped out.

Another way to track the change in radicalization is through the propagation of conspiracy theories and misinformation. We identify changes in the volume of such content using two complementary approaches. First, Figure 16 shows the composition of conspiracy-related discussion by month from April 2020 to March 2021. Note that this metric is extremely narrow, capturing only the content specifically bounded within the conspiracy domain identified by the topic model, not the COVID-19, BLM, and mask-related misinformation that permeated those topics (see Table 1). The lead up to the November election was a clear watershed for the conspiratorial turn within the movement.

Reaction to BLM and Female Politicians. National events made more prominent the racism, sexism, and conspiratorial discourse that were latent in the early stages of the Reopen movement. We dig deeper into the radicalization process by characterizing sentiment levels across topics. Panels (a) and (b) of Figure 17 show the cumulative distribution of inflammatory and insult scores by topic. Posts and comments related to Michigan and BLM use the most inflammatory and insulting language. The BLM topic highlights the latent racism that became entrenched within the Reopen movement after the George Floyd protests in early June. In a single thread, BLM protestors were alleged to be

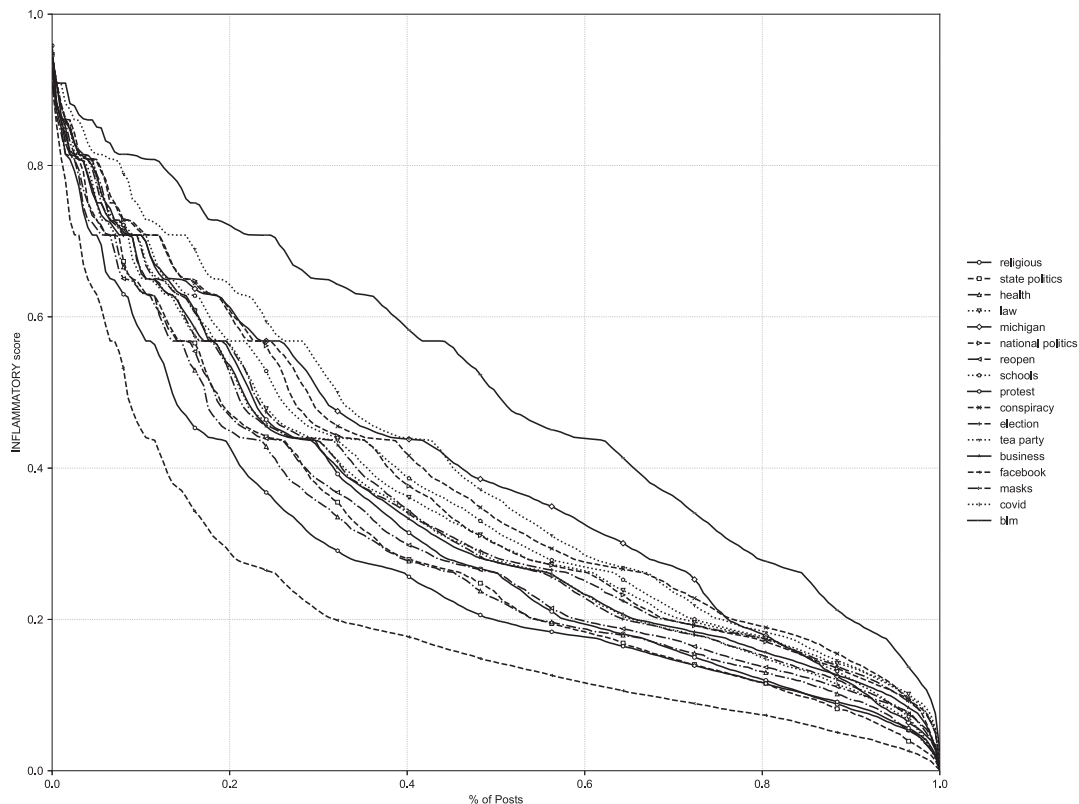


Figure 17 Distribution of sentiment across topics

Notes: This figure shows the cumulative distribution of comments, by topic, exceeding the given level of (left) inflammatory score and (right) insult score.

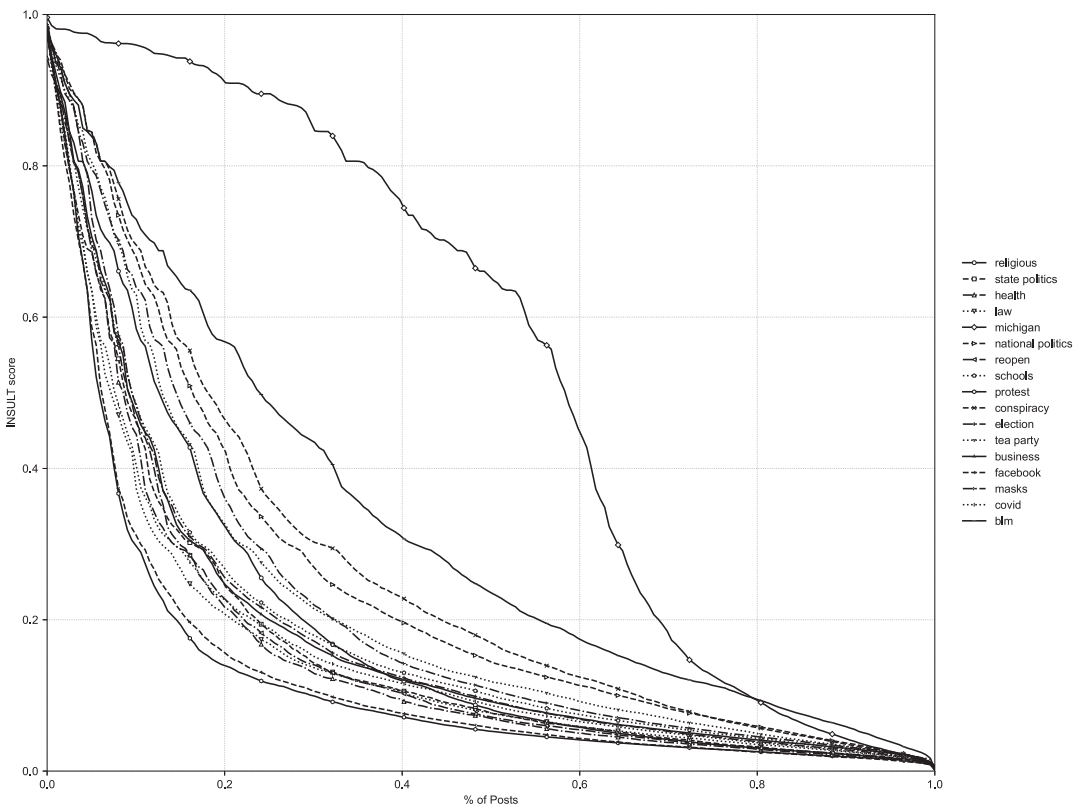


Figure 17 (cont.)

paid protestors, sheep, basement dwellers, idiots, snowflakes, rioters, ignorant people who wanted to loot and destroy, “activated by Soros to seize the moment,” “Paid Democrats,” a result of a “Demon C rat City,” “STOOPID,” part of an orchestrated effort, and fomenting a “race war” and “RACE RIOT” (Take Action Colorado, May 29, 2020). The other issue where latent radicalism emerged was gender. Discussions of female politicians, including Republican leaders like South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem, were more prone to toxicity than discussions of male politicians. Figure 18 shows that comments on posts discussing women tended to be much more threatening than on posts discussing men.

Some of the most toxic language in the Reopen movement concerned Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer and then Vice-Presidential candidate Kamala Harris. The latter was subject to toxicity connected to her race as well as her gender. We characterize the discourse around Harris by using word embeddings to understand the semantic relationships between terms that appeared in posts and comments that contained her name. After training a set

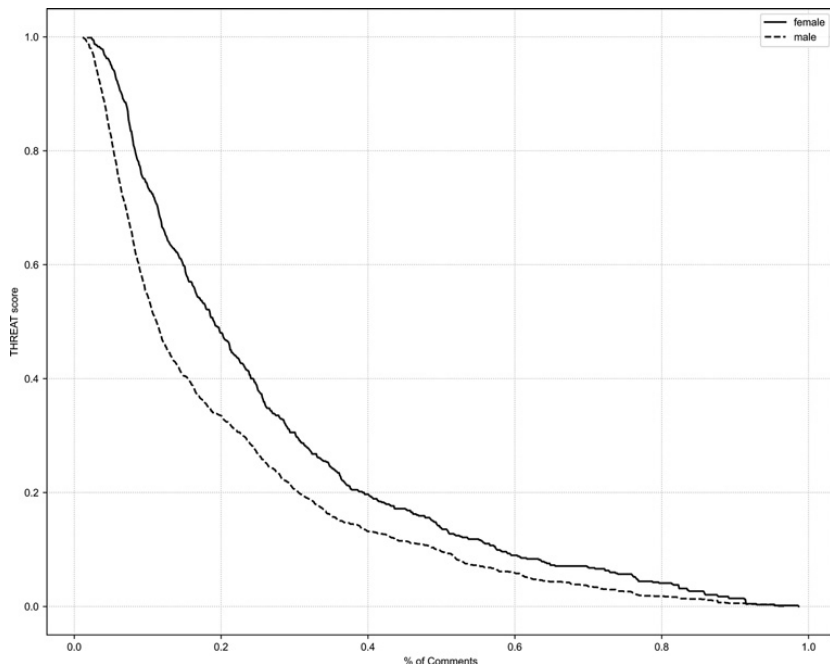


Figure 18 Distribution of sentiment across posts discussing men versus women

Notes: This figure plots the cumulative distribution of comments, by posts discussing each gender, exceeding the given level of threat score.

of word embeddings on these posts and comments, we created a graph depicting the embeddings that exceeded a preset threshold of frequency (5 times) and were no more than two hops away from “Kamala” or “Harris” in the embedding results. The connections in the graph can be interpreted as meaningful relationships between “Kamala” or “Harris” and the term represented in the graph. Distances represent the closeness of the relationship. For visual representation, we set the graph to begin with the term “demon,” which appeared frequently in the corpus. We then analyzed the network using a Louvain community detection algorithm and color-coding sets of word embeddings that were determined to be related to one another.

In Figure 19, we identify five distinct narrative clusters around Kamala Harris. The cluster in the top right region contains terms related to news stories and the common idea that then-presidential candidate Biden had dementia. The cluster in the bottom right region includes both left-leaning Democratic party names and terms commonly used as accusations in the Reopen groups,

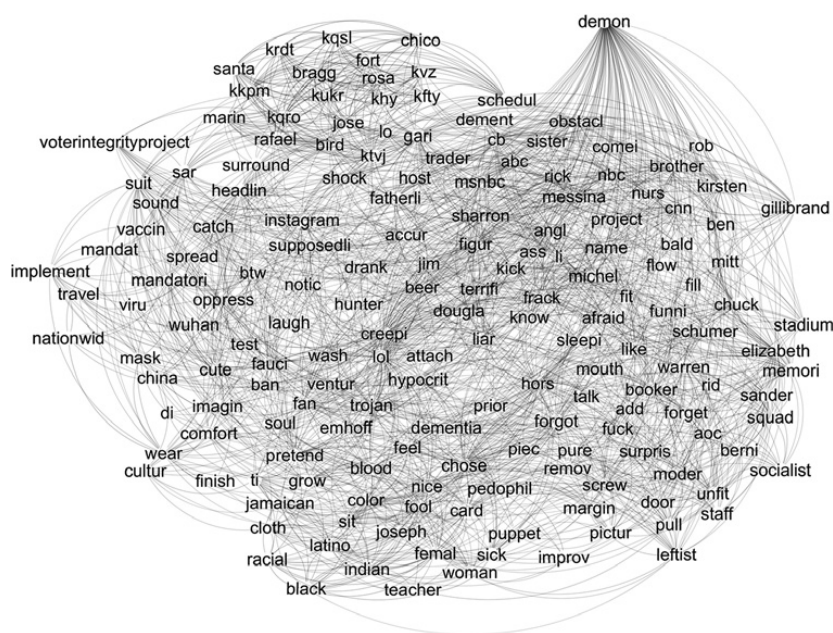


Figure 19 Word embedding network for Kamala Harris

Notes: A visualization of word embeddings surrounding the usage of the terms “kamala” and “harris” where nodes from the same community (detected using the Louvain community detection method) are depicted with the same colors). The communities identified can be interpreted as narrative clusters, containing keywords used in identical context together as part of the same community.

including “socialist” and a handful of curse terms. The cluster in the top left region refers to local issues in California and a group of radio stations that were the source of many stories about the California senator. The center left region consists of conspiracy terms; “hunter” for Hunter Biden, “Wuhan” and “China” for discussions of Covid-19, and “trojan” in reference to a conspiracy theory in which the pandemic is a Trojan horse for autocracy. Finally, the bottom right region consists of terms related to Harris’s identity as a multiracial woman, and it is here that we see references to “blood” and “pedophile.”

What the clusters together indicate is that discussions of Kamala Harris quite often involved the idea that Harris would be the socialist puppet master behind a demented Joe Biden (the purple and orange clusters), frequently included discussions of her ethnic background and family (the blue cluster), were occasionally about California-specific issues (the light green cluster), and often contained conspiratorial speculation. Importantly, these were not simply terms that also appeared in these posts: These terms were semantically connected to the term Kamala Harris. Whenever discussion of Harris appeared, racist, sexist, and conspiratorial terms were being used to talk about her.

Finally, [Figure 20](#) shows the evolution of radicalized sentiment toward Chinese and African-Americans during the first year of the Reopen movement. The trend lines show average identity-attack scores for posts discussing these two groups, respectively, against a baseline benchmark of all posts in Facebook groups devoted to cooking recipes, and a fan group about the TV show *Parks and Recreation*. Overall levels of toxicity were generally higher toward Chinese, which is consistent with the movement’s racist views of the “Chinese” or “Wuhan” virus. However, anti-Black racism spiked, surpassing racism toward Chinese, for a brief period in mid-2020 in the wake of the BLM protests.

Facebook Content Moderation. A surprising vector for radicalization resulted from Facebook’s approach to content moderation. Scholars have previously critically examined Facebook’s intervention approaches toward hate and extremist ideologies and groups, showing how hate networks are able to collectively adapt and rewire themselves under current policing choices (Johnson et al. 2019). For the Reopen movement, Facebook shut down four Michigan groups due to threats of violence against Governor Whitmer. But the individuals were not removed, and as a result, they simply dispersed to other groups. We managed to track 135 members from the removed groups and collected 3,564 of their comments. Such a small sample makes it hard to compare with the larger sample across topics and by levels of toxicity, but the qualitative analysis is clear: The Michigan activists in exile were radicalized. We can trace this qualitatively by selecting a few comments from each month

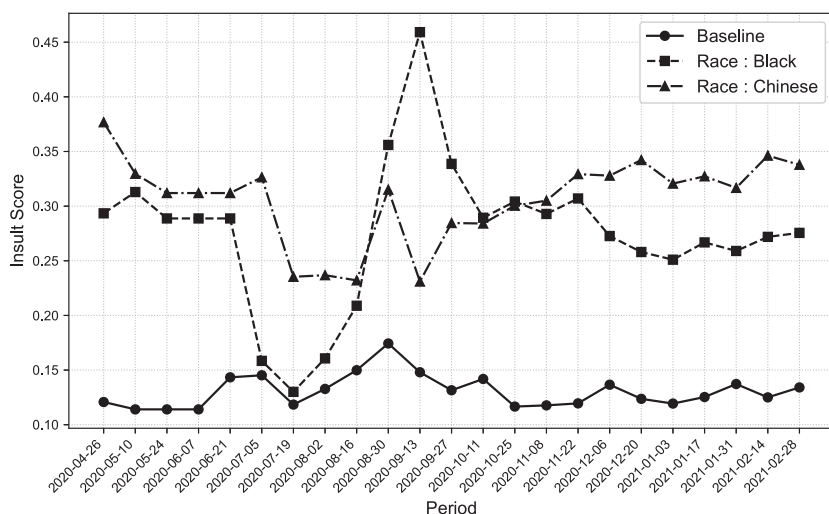


Figure 20 Weekly progression of toxicity toward ethnic Chinese and African-Americans

Notes: Using Google’s Perspective API, we characterize the text of posts related to race and blacks, including “Black, Floyd, Harris, blm, and blacklivesmatter” and related to race and Chinese, including “China, Chinese, chink, chingchong, chinazi, ccp, and wuhan.” The baseline Identity Attack score is calculated using posts from different public Facebook Groups about cooking recipes, and a fan group about the TV series *Parks and Recreation*.

shown in [Table 2](#), which provides a representative sample of comments from the Michigan activists who dispersed to other groups: in May 2020, commenters questioned official COVID-19 data and floated conspiracies about vaccines, claiming they were an “electronic ID tattoo or chip,” for example. By July, this suspicion had solidified, and commenters brought up conspiracy theories outside of COVID-19, from “epsteins island” to Obama’s citizenship. In August, discussions about government overreach included violent undercurrents: “want to kick some ass . . . we need a militia.” In October, rhetoric reached comparisons to Nazi Germany and included vitriolic misogyny: “welcome to nazi germany . . . stretchen Gretchen.” By the end of 2020, just before the January 6 insurgency, paranoia and threats peaked: “It is a civil war just no shots fired yet . . . off with her head.” In January and February 2021, the calls for extralegal action were overt: “Time for the Military to take over,” “I’ll help build the gallow.”

Radical Latecomers. A final unexpected mechanism for radicalization came from people who joined the Reopen movement after the period of exhaustion had set in. Similar patterns are known to social movement scholars; as the

Table 2 Comments by Michigan activists dispersed to other Facebook groups

- May 2020:** “Many of my family and friends work in hospitals. Hospitals are getting paid over \$30 k per patient they deem as covid. How do you not know this by now???” “Wait till you have an electronic ID tattoo or chip stating you’ve had a vaccine among other things. Not sure when but somethings brewing and it’s not hearsay it is in all kinds of documentation and news.”
- June 2020:** “watch this virus leave after the elections.”
- July 2020:** “sheep sheep sheep bahhhhhhhh go eat your grass and wipe bidens ass.” “prove it not with hear say or opinion . . . prove it . . . obama was a traitor not a us citizen and married to michael robinson and spied on trump towers before trump even became president and look at the clintons guilty of alot but yet traveled to epsteins island so much they had their own living quarters. i can go on and on. the democratic party is corrupt and tump is taking them all down . . . dont bother to respond to me cause nothing you have to say is worth listening too because i am not brain washed.”
- August 2020:** “Hey guys you want to kick some ass. I’m sure they’d love to thump antifa.” “I suggested in another post we need a militia and some bikers groups to help. Gypsy jokers” [a militia]
- October 2020:** “She’s a snake. Lies like the devil. Is she holding us hostage again.” “Democrats suck.” “we all know the virus is a political farce.” “Hitler saved lives too.” “She likes sex in an uncomfortable way if you get my drift. Hence the nickname stretchen Gretchen.” “It’s going to cost a lot more if the btch continues to violate our rights!” “bite me fauci . . . bite me!” “I can’t wait till we’re rid of this albatross.” “When is someone going to LOCK HER UP!!!” “welcome to nazi germany.” “like some blacks faking they were beat up or a noose put around their neck. All Democrats.” “Yes I do agree he like most of the Dems are on a mission that has jack to do with the people. All about hunger for power and globalism. This election is a no joke seriously life or death for the USA!” “everywhere I went today was full of sheep. You can see how easy it was for Hitler!”
- November 2020:** “geez I guess so they’re main goal is to get contact tracing at least that’s what they’re calling it they want everybody’s personal info is the bottom line to start they’re agenda of socialism.” “And the left will continue to see what they can get away with; what we’ll submit to; and then they’ll move on to the next step . and so on and so on.” “Good riddens Bitchmer.” “First off there is no raging epidemic let alone a pandemic the governor is a little lost sheep in a world of wolves.” “wear a mask! They want control of you!Masks don’t work!” “Sounds like what the nazis did. Make lists wherever the Jews were. Suppression. Now Democrats are trying to control the people by not permitting anyone associated with Trump to hold office.” “I’ve always thought that Trump was a slender reed to lean on. Like some in Judah

Table 2 (cont.)

wanting to rely on Egypt instead of the Lord.” “sounding more and more like the gestapo “She won with Soros money as did Whitmer and Nessel. They all knew each other through Soros.” “C O N T R O L” “Oh it’s been a coup from the beginning they know exactly what their doing THE LYING \$#@% &!÷&.!!!!!!” “bye bye small businesses bye bye america . . . if people don’t start fighting this insanity.” “Wondering how many people she had to get on her knees for that?” “isn’t it a tranny? This whole thing has been authorized by Nazi lovers. I continue to civilly protest. Stay strong and keep educating the brainless and weak.”

December 2020: “It’s all BS!! Draconian Democrats trying desperately to use this virus as a weapon to control the people and gain the power they yearn for.” “Fb hired Chinese communists to do the censoring of all conservative posts.” “Kinda sounding like the Nazis making the Jews wear the Star of David! Better stand up people! Out of Bill Gates mouth” “Obama is the leader of the Demorat organized crime ring!” “the us does have communist party they just run under the guise of democratic socialist and the latest Marxists party is The BLM party” “Dirty rotten Nevada demoncraps.” “Has anyone heard of one democrat catching covid? If haven’t” “Sheep wear face diapers.” “just because they post it does not mean its true. lets see proof so we can put the grentchen in jail.” “Obama is in charge of the coup that is taking place. He is the only ex president to not move away from DC when his terms were up. He is definitely in the works!” “I’m sure dominion ‘voted’ for witchmer.” “sounds like germany in 1933.” “Animal Farm!” “reptilian swamp creature!” “I wish it was that easy. They will not go quietly. It would be a civil war . . . let me rephrase that . . . it is a civil war just no shots fired yet and I only give that a short time. I don’t know about you but I’m fed up!” “Communist doing her best. Wish she would move to china where she belongs!” “you really think she sucks D? She probably has a strap on she uses on her husband.” “The President needs to call martial law in Michigan and she needs to be gone!” “We are the news now . . . Q” “This pedo has at least three kids tied up in his basement right now.” “collectivism at its early stages. the seeds of failure are starting to sprout.” “their all Chinese puppets.” “I choose war! Time to get it on and take out the trash!” “Kommie kate member of the CCP dethrone the bitch. Or as the queen of hearts said ‘off with her head.’” “So she wants us to kiss her ass. Considering she is all ass. But I will pass. She has cooties.” “It would appear as though China is taking over our government! They have their hand in quite a few things. From spies in certain places to their hand in the voting machines that stole the election. Not to mention donating millions into the

Table 2 (cont.)

	election and supporting China Joe and his family!.” “I remember the night soon after my two twin nephews were MMR vaxxed. One died in his sleep from a brain fever.” “All these idiots are bought out by the communists!” “”She’s just holding the lockdowns till Biden gets in office. Reasoning.” “Animal Farm!!!!” “It’s time to grab your pitchforks and storm the castle.” “Fuck Obama! He should be in prison!” January 2021: “Whitmer and friends are assholes and need to go to prison!” “I’ve been told there is plenty of the vaccine available from a reliable source. My guess is the Queen is waiting till Sleepy Joe is in office to make it look like he got more vaccines available then Our President.” “Pointless. Then what? We get KAMala. We are screwed!” “All the sheep are in their pen.” “”Liberals are the enemy of this country.” “I refuse to get the vaccine! I think it’s bs!! Wake the fck up people! Quit being sheep and be lions!! Stand up for what is right!” “Good luck! One party rule! We can thank Dominion voting machines for that.” “Wondering if she was really born or is she a scientific experiment that has no brain.” “I also wondered if they are telling people when given the vaccine that it’s changing your DNA?” Idiots. Demonfilledcrackheaded dumbasses.” “Inciting violence! Lock the B up!” “Let biden try and lock us down.” “If martial Law is what it takes for a fair election and the rightful Man takes his place im all for it.” “Satan is restless because he knows his time is growing short!” “She handles this about as good as Clinton handled her husband’s penis. That’s why Billy boy had to go elsewhere.” “I’ll help build the gallow.” February 2021: “you mean this has been a farce from the start? Oh silly me for being all in on this plandemic!” “Evil and child of Satan !!” “Disbar me there was election fraud you nimwit.” “ Don’t u mean help CHEAT on the election?!!!!” “Just because someone gets vaccinated doesn’t give them immunity . . . they can still get the VIRUS! So what’s the point of the vaccine? And if the vaccine is “”the answer”” then why do people have to still wear masks? Isn’t the vaccine doing what it supposed to do? I think the people who spun this virus so out of control have gone so far down the hole . . . I’m not sure how things can ever be normal again other than just saying no more!””Biden has to follow through with his promises to Burisma and the Chinese energy companies.” “Trump! Spring of 2021 !” “Try 1 Samuel 7(end) and 1 Samuel 8. The Israelites rejected their true King and wanted a lesser mortal king like everyone else.” “ Their own natural immune system must be working quite well. Why would you want to mess that up with big pharma being pushed by Bill Gates and liar Fauci. Follow the money.” “time for parents to start targeting sex offenders themselves. our
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Table 2 (cont.)

laws have proven unable to even slow the growth of perversion and violence.” “I’m sure Whitmer stole the last election.” “Not surprising since Whitmer has had Chinese relationship since her tenure as governor and possibly before.” “So the vaccine puts you more at risk of getting the virus if only taking one shot. So what they are saying is after you get the first one you are MORE susceptible for the 21 day’s before you get the next one. And then their (or did) saying you don’t really need the second one you’ll be ok. Why doesn’t everyone just smoke some crack would works just as good.” Maybe it’s time to reopen mental sanitariums for these liberal left lunatics!” “Time for the Military to take over.” “She needs to move to China.”

Students for a Democratic Society expanded, new members viewed the old guard as elitist and insufficiently radical (Miller 1987, 242). Unlike the Reopen founders whose grievances were largely economic and political, these late-joining activists seem to have sought out spaces where they could engage in extremist posturing.

We compare the early and late-joining activists using a word-embedding approach. Early activists are defined as those engaged in any of the Reopen groups beginning from the first three months of the movement in April–June 2020, and late activists are those who joined thereafter. We find that latecomers were more conspiracy-minded and radical than early activists. Latecomers went beyond common Republican talking points about fraud, communist influence, and treason. They were more likely to refer to violence, militias, and fighting, and to government policies as draconian. They referenced China’s/ Chinese Communist Party conspiracy to undermine America, or by Iran, Russia, or Venezuela. Latecomers were more likely to reference indoctrination of children in education, as well as withdrawing their children from school. They were more likely to talk about the election being rigged, illegitimate, or fraudulent with references to ballot harvesting and multiple voting or “revoting.” They were more likely to reference tyranny, America as a dictatorship, and home to cabals, thieves, and Satan. They also trumpeted conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 vaccine being a cause of sterilization, poison, or otherwise experimental, and cured using ivermectin.

Were the latecomers elite operatives promoting Trump’s re-election? Figure 21 suggests, instead, a more grassroots influence. The outsized attention to Michigan indicates that many of the latecomers were originally members of the groups shut down by Facebook. In these users’ ongoing

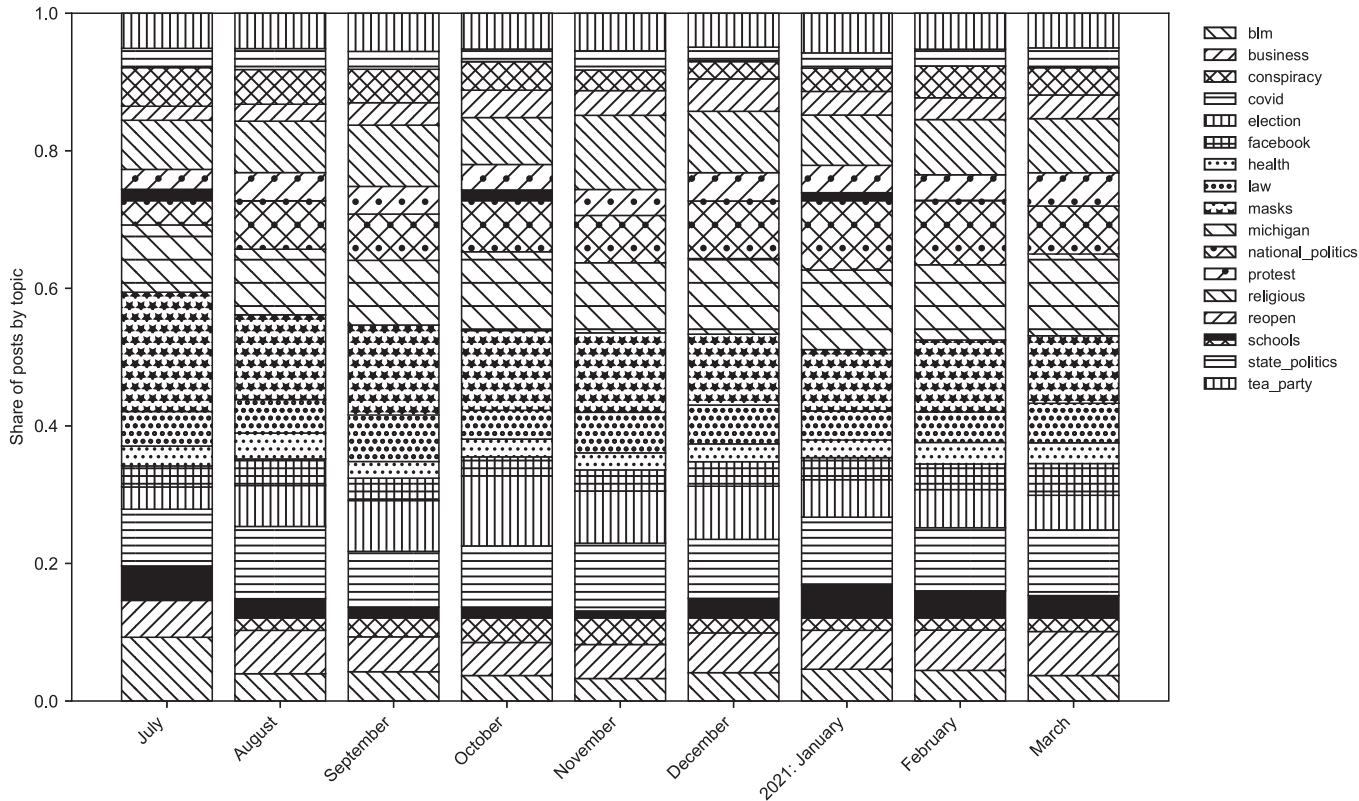


Figure 21 Topic model for early and late activists

Notes: This figure reports the month-by-month evolution of the topical mix of posts made separately by those early activists who joined Reopen from April to June 2020 and those late activists who joined Reopen groups from July 2020 to March 2021. The height of the colored bars in this figure reflects the share of the month's total posts classified as belonging to the given topic.

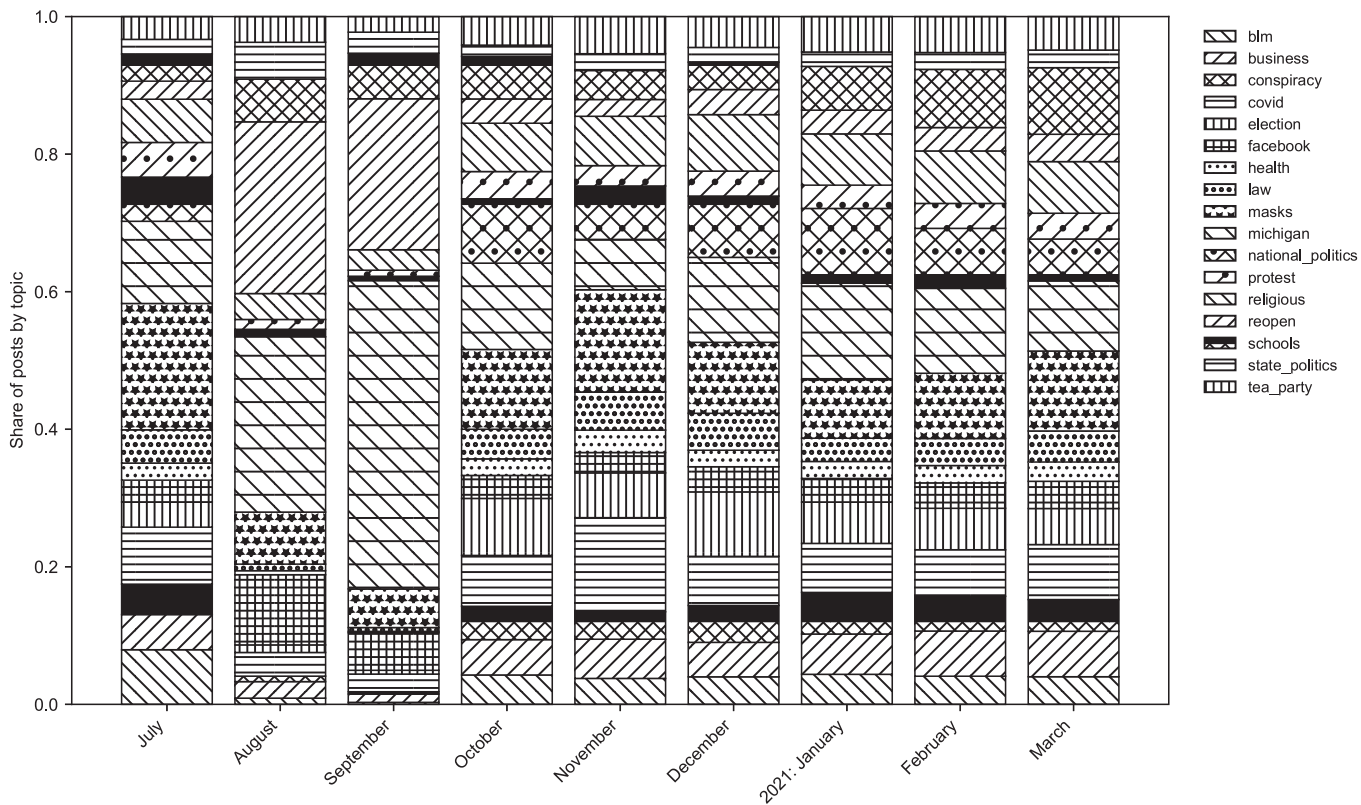


Figure 21 (cont.)

attention to armed protest in Michigan, we see traces of their dispersion throughout the larger Reopen movement. An increase in the Michigan topic in August and September corresponds to preparation for a September 17, 2020 incident in which armed protestors surrounded the Michigan state house. That protest was followed by the arrest of MUL activists Adam Fox and Paul Bellar for plotting to kidnap, try, and execute the Michigan governor (Macklin 2021). In sum, as the movement radicalized alongside the Trump campaign and in reaction to national political events, more racist, misogynist, and violent activists joined the Reopen movement and contributed further to extremism.

5 Conclusion

The Reopen movement was a massive, initially nonpartisan movement that emerged during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic due to economic concerns about job loss and government restrictions on liberty. Through a coalition of grassroots activists and elites, it grew into a hybrid online/offline movement with nationwide protests, Facebook groups with over 2.5 million members mobilized around a set of common themes, and a policy agenda. Protests helped the movement to grow and solidify, especially online. Offline protests peaked in May and June 2020, and as states began to reopen the remnant online architecture led to a drift away from the original goals and radicalization. While the Reopen movement has been described as Astroturf, the members formed a durable and meaningful community that shaped their interpretations of an especially chaotic time in American life, with lasting legacies both within the movement and beyond it.

Our analysis in this Element is ultimately a descriptive one. We deliberately avoid over-claiming potential impacts of the Reopen movement. Yet, we make three contributions to the study of contentious politics in the digital age.

Theoretically, we find that in the digital age, the cycle of protest framework is useful to describe the origins, growth, and diffusion of the movement, as well as the decline in protest activity due to exhaustion and institutionalization. But digital movements have an architecture that requires scholarly attention because of its implications for movement growth, impact, and decline. A social media-based movement fosters ideological fragmentation, repurposing, and distraction. We also identified fluid interactions between online movement activists and offline politics at the local level. We found clear connections between the online movement and offline protest activity, with some of the biggest impacts

of offline protests occurring online. We also found that movement activity online correlated with shifts in the Trump administration's pandemic policy. We live in an age when the boundary between online and offline is porous; as scholars, we must track social movements wherever they live in order to map the protest cycle and its impacts.

A second contribution is to radicalization in the digital age. While the movement was home to rampant anti-Chinese racism from the outset, it more fully radicalized in response to the BLM protests. Facebook moderation had the unintended consequence of dispersing toxicity rather than eliminating it. Likewise, a second wave of activists joined after offline exhaustion, pushing more conspiracies, misinformation, racism, and misogyny than the early members. The movement took an institutional and partisan turn as the November presidential election approached and became swamped with misinformation, conspiracy theories, and increased references to violence, especially after the election loss of President Trump. In a digital age, the weak ties among movement activists and low barriers to entry invite radicalization throughout the protest cycle. Social movements scholars must map the architecture of online and hybrid movements, as their structure significantly impacts radicalization opportunities, timing, and dynamics.

Finally, our synthesis of ethnography and big data demonstrates the payoffs of looking inside movements to chart the processes of evolution, fragmentation, radicalization, and change that are more difficult to demarcate using a single method. In fact, we feel that we have only scratched the surface of the potential applications of this approach to studying social movements. Ethnography provides a powerful tool to map the feelings of being part of a movement and the agentive aspects of movement genesis, growth, and change. Text analysis allows scholars to scale up those observations and detect movement change and variation at scale. Text analysis also helps to validate insights that originate in ethnographic observation. Together, text analysis and ethnography are powerful and complementary partners for meaningful, large-scale analysis of social movements.

Our sense of that nascent potential is partly a function of the limits of our data. Today, Facebook is home to much of the global public sphere. And yet it is a nightmare for researchers (Tufekci 2017, ch. 6). There is a great amount of information about the politics of the twenty-first century that may never be known because of Facebook's opacity. Facebook's refusal to share data about private groups, its truncated sharing of public information, and the blackhole that faces scholars trying to systematically document political action on its platform all combine to mean that future scholars will be unable to describe

the public sphere in this period in the same way that contemporary scholars are able to access newspaper archives. We hope one of the outcomes of our research will be that scholars see the vast potential of using Facebook data, but also the importance of pushing the platform toward greater responsibility and transparency.

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