

Commentary

# Threats to Women/Women as Threats: Male Supremacy and the Anti-Statist Right

Chelsea Ebin 

Politics Faculty, Centre College, Danville, KY 40422, USA; [chelsea.ebin@centre.edu](mailto:chelsea.ebin@centre.edu)

**Abstract:** Throughout the Trump administration, media coverage of extremist factions of the American right grew considerably, as did the actual membership and numbers of those factions. Included among these factions, and operating on a spectrum that ranges from the center-to-fringe right, are white supremacist, Christian nationalist, and militia/patriot/sovereign citizen (broadly termed constitutionalist) movements. While the American right is heterogeneous, most of these groups are composed of white men, and male supremacy is often a common ideological denominator. Based on historical trends, recent activity, and ongoing movement mobilizations, we should anticipate increased recruitment and activism on the part of anti-statist right-wing groups during the Biden administration. While much has been written about the threat of terroristic violence these groups pose and their varying levels of engagement with white supremacist beliefs, examinations of gender have largely focused on masculinity. This note takes up the relationship between anti-statist right-wing movements and women by sketching three key areas that warrant further examination: (1) how collective interpretations of the law leave women vulnerable by refusing the legitimacy of federal legislation; (2) the threat of militia violence against women, particularly those who hold elected office; (3) how racial and gender exclusions preclude women from having their claims to membership in anti-statist right-wing movements be fully recognized. As we take stock of the growing threat posed by these movements, it is incumbent on us to critically examine the threats to women's rights posed by the anti-statist right.



**Citation:** Ebin, Chelsea. 2021. Threats to Women/Women as Threats: Male Supremacy and the Anti-Statist Right. *Laws* 10: 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws10020041>

Received: 5 March 2021  
Accepted: 18 May 2021  
Published: 20 May 2021

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**Keywords:** anti-statist; right-wing; women's rights; male supremacy; gendered violence

## 1. Introduction

In the final months of the Trump presidency, anti-statist threats and violence became increasingly prevalent. On 8 October 2020, news broke that a Wisconsin militia had planned to kidnap and try for treason the “tyrant b—h” governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, for exercising executive authority to impose COVID-19 related public health measures (Witsil 2020). Three months later, the nation watched as a mass of people stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to subvert the certification of the presidential election. Among the insurgents was Ashli Babbitt, a thirty-five-year-old Air Force veteran, who was shot and killed by a Capitol police officer after illegally entering the building (Barry et al. 2021). On the day of the insurgency, videos and images of anti-statist actors and groups depicted a crowd comprised largely of aggrieved and angry men, who were willing to sack the nation's capital to, in their minds, keep the nation great. This depiction reflected the actual demographics of the protestors, who were overwhelmingly white and male (Pape 2021).<sup>1</sup> The attempted insurrection on 6 January, which saw individual Trump supporters join a broad and diverse range of right-wing groups coalesce in a unified attack on the nation's capital (Thompson and Fischer 2021), drove home for many the threat to American democracy posed by right-wing activists. Yet, the threat posed by anti-statist movements is neither recent nor solely the provenance of men who support Trump. Moreover, it is not solely motivated by economic precarity, racism, or nativism, although these are central factors. Anti-statism is also centrally concerned with gender, particularly as expressed

through ideologies of masculinity and male supremacy. Stories like those concerning Whitmer and Babbitt help draw our attention to how anti-statist violence is both directed at and perpetrated by women and highlight the need for more complex understandings of how anti-statism can both endanger women and draw them into the movement.

This research note takes up the relationship between anti-statist right-wing movements and women by identifying three key areas that warrant further examination: (1) how anti-statist right-wing interpretations of the law leave women vulnerable by refusing the legitimacy of the federal government and federal legislation; (2) the threat of anti-statist violence against women, particularly those who hold elected office, such as Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan; (3) the role of women as anti-statist right-wing agents whose claims to full membership may be complicated or challenged as a result of racial and gender exclusions. Together, these three areas provide an entry point for considering how we may center gender and gender violence in our understanding of the anti-statist right. In turn, centering gender and gender violence helps us illustrate how discourses of legitimacy/illegitimacy and boundaries of inclusion/exclusion are constructed within anti-statist right-wing movements.

The broad contention of this research note is male supremacy, understood as a complex system that serves to assert, support, and promote the supposed superiority of men, is central to right-wing anti-statism. In other words, it rejects the implicit or explicit contention that we can understand right-wing anti-statism without understanding male supremacy. There are several compelling explanations for the proliferation of anti-statist right-wing movements. Some focus on racism and fears of racial displacement; others examine the influence of capitalism and economic precarity on developing anti-statist attitudes. This note aims not to adjudicate between these explanations; it is to advance the claim that male supremacy should be understood to cut across and operate within these logics. To center male supremacy in our understanding of the anti-statist right-wing requires us to undertake new studies. This research note, focused on identifying areas of future exploration and posing questions that have not yet been answered, is intended as a first step in that direction.

I begin with a brief overview of developing the anti-statist right before turning to an examination of how anti-statist beliefs may threaten the provision of women's rights. This is followed by a cursory examination of how a scholarly focus on patriarchal traditionalist attitudes within the anti-statist right may have led us to downplay the threat of violence to women. Finally, I close by broaching how we should understand women's active participation within anti-statist right-wing movements.

Throughout the Trump administration, media coverage of extremist factions of the American right grew considerably, as did the actual membership and numbers of those factions.<sup>2</sup> Rather than diminish in response to Trump's electoral defeat, based on historical trends, recent activity, and ongoing movement mobilizations (Neiwert 2017), we should anticipate increased recruitment and activism on the part of right-wing groups during the Biden administration (Tharoor 2021). As we take stock of the growing threat, the right poses to American democratic governance broadly, it is incumbent on us to critically examine the relationship between right-wing anti-statism and male supremacy and to investigate the implications of this relationship for the rights of women and other historically marginalized and oppressed groups of people. While by no means exhaustive, the following discussion aims to highlight potential directions for future research in this area.

## 2. Overview of the Development of Anti-Statist Right-Wing Movements

While the landscape of the American right is heterogeneous, most right-wing groups are composed of white men, and male supremacy is increasingly a common ideological denominator (Bates 2021). Much has been written about the threat of terroristic violence right-wing groups pose (Auger 2020; Jones et al. 2020; Rotella 2021); the origins, varying levels of engagement with, and development of white supremacist beliefs within the right (Gordon 2017; Belew 2019; Rosenthal 2020, pp. 125–48); and new modes and technologies

of recruitment (DeCook 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020). Comparatively, fewer works on the right have centered analysis of either male supremacy or the agency of women (Jeansonne 1996; Blee 2002; Darby 2020). Works that do engage with questions of gender have tended to focus on the performance and production of discourses and ideologies of masculinity (Ferber 1998; Gallaher 2003). This lacuna is particularly pronounced in the scholarship on anti-statist right-wing movements, such as those represented by militia and patriot groups as well as sovereign citizens.

Scholars whose work focuses on sovereign citizens and militias/patriot movements have argued that each should be treated as distinct as they possess distinctive ideologies, utilize specific strategies, and pose diverse threats (Cooter 2013; Berlet 2004). However, in the aftermath of the 6 January insurrection, when it became evident that a wide range of anti-statist movements were converging, and for the purposes of this note, which is focused on the generalized dangers posed by anti-statist thought, I am choosing to treat them holistically. Doing so allows for an engagement with the shared challenges these groups pose, even as it requires a flattening of the more granular ideologies and the specificity attendant to recruitment for each subgroup.

In their typology of the right, the sociologists Kathleen Blee and Kimberly Creasap distinguish between the two kinds of movements: conservative and right-wing (Blee and Creasap 2010). According to Blee and Creasap, the former operates within the institutionalized political system, embracing “patriotism, free enterprise capitalism, and/or a traditional moral order”. At the same time, the latter are movements that focus on “race/ethnicity and/or that promote violence” (Blee and Creasap 2010, p. 270). Their typology is useful for highlighting how anti-statist movements occupy a special place within the American right by blurring the distinction between “conservative” and “right-wing”. These movements uniquely engage in acts of anti-state violence while simultaneously operating in the register of hyper-patriotism.

The anti-statist right-wing encompasses two main sub-movements: (1) the militia and patriot movements; and (2) the sovereign citizen movement (Southern Poverty Law Center SPLC). These groups are dominated by white men (Gallaher 2003) and united by a “core principle . . . that the federal government (along with state governments in some cases) is illegitimate and must be resisted by any means necessary” (Jackson 2019a, p. 7). They are broadly distinguished from one another by the former’s refusal of all governmental authority and avowal of the sovereignty of the individual (Berger 2016; Sarteschi 2020) and the latter’s use of overt patriotic symbolism to express its hostility toward the federal government.

Both broad groupings can be said to have their origins in the anti-Semitic, white supremacist, and anti-government Posse Comitatus movement of the 1970s (Berger 2016; Cooter 2013; Gallaher 2016; Pitcavage 2001). Founded by Henry L. “Mike” Beach, a businessman and former member of the anti-Semitic and fascist Silver League, and the white supremacist William Potter Gale, the “loosely organized Posse movement” taught that the federal government was illegitimate and “that no entity above the county sheriff’s posse possesses constitutional validity” (Barkun 1997, p. 69). The movement appealed to those on the right, who were: experiencing economic precarity (Berlet and Sunshine 2019), opposed to the government taking action in defense of African American civil rights and anti-abortionists, Christian millennialists and dominionists, among others (Berlet and Lyons 2000). It also drew on the white supremacist and anti-Semitic belief system propagated by the religiously inspired white nationalist movement termed Christian Identity (Barkun 1997).

Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, there was slow and unorganized growth on the anti-statist right. Conspiracist theories about the illegitimacy of the federal government continued to percolate, shifting from the explicitly anti-Semitic belief that there was a Zionist Occupied Government to the belief that the US government has fallen under the spell of a “new world order” orchestrated by the United Nations and/or other foreign power (Gallaher 2003; Perliger 2021). During this period, there was movement in developing the sovereign Citizen legal framework, which purports to provide subscribers with the

tools for rejecting the authority and legitimacy of the federal government (Berger 2016), and an attempt by Gale to form the “Unorganized Militia of the Committee of States”. As right-wing analyst Mark Pitcavage explains, “Gale appropriated the term unorganized militia from federal law; by so doing, he hoped to link his group to the militia mentioned in the constitution and federal and state law” (Pitcavage 2001, p. 960).

While the militia movement clearly had its origins in earlier white supremacist movements, it did not solidify until after 1994, in the aftermath of two highly publicized and botched federal standoffs ostensibly carried out due to weapons violations (Cooter 2013; Gallaher 2003). These federal law enforcement confrontations, first at Ruby Ridge, in Idaho, with the Weaver family, and later in Waco, Texas, with the Branch Davidian religious community, were perceived by self-identified patriots as an overreach of federal authority and thought to reflect the growing threat posed by the government to individual’s Second Amendment rights (Berlet and Lyons 2000, pp. 817–65). The perceived threat of an armed confrontation with the federal government helped to solidify the belief among nascent militia members that they had a constitutional obligation and duty to protect themselves. No longer expressly white nationalist, the militia movement in the early to mid-1990s drew on postwar arguments and identities developed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Belew 2019; Mason 2002, pp. 9–45) and gained momentum by capitalizing on fears of racial unrest in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots, economic instability and dislocation caused by the farming crisis of the 1980s, and the “radicalization of the gun rights movement” (Pitcavage 2001, p. 962).

While its public growth was interrupted by the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, after Timothy McVeigh was erroneously identified as a militia member, anti-statist ideologies continued to percolate (Cooter 2013). Dealt another blow by the 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, David Neiwert has shown how right-wing anti-statism was redirected toward producing “9/11 Truther” conspiracies and the policing of the Southern border, with groups like the anti-immigrant Minutemen, who rose to fame by pledging to patrol the country’s Southern border, gaining widespread attention. For a brief period, after a series of high visibility criminal actions by affiliates led the Minutemen to collapse, right-wing anti-statism appeared to be relegated to the actions of individual sovereign citizens (Neiwert 2017, pp. 150–87). However, this perception was a misguided one that failed to consider the growing extremism and radicalization of right-wing media, which continued to actively promote anti-statist ideologies (Neiwert 2017, pp. 150–87). By 2009, capitalizing on new technologies that facilitated recruitment, and seemingly in response to the election of the country’s first Black president and a global Great Recession, right anti-statist movements grew exponentially (Cooter 2013). This so-called “second wave” of the militia movement (Perliger 2021) has continued to form new organizations, like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, to recruit new members and to forge new alliances on the right. These new iterations are characterized by their embrace of a more national, rather than hyper-localized, identity, increased online, and therefore, decentralized, communication, and the increased “prominence of law enforcement and military veterans in their ranks,” giving rise to concerns about the growing threat they pose to national security (Perliger 2021).

The historical development of the right-wing anti-statist movement that is sketched here is well-trodden territory. Accounts of developing these movements often identify key female characters, such as Amy Cooter’s account of the role played by the attorney Linda Thompson in attempting to mobilize a militia defense of the Branch Davidians during the Waco siege (Cooter 2013, pp. 46–47). However, due to the overwhelmingly male composition of the groups, they tend to take male organizing and the framework of masculinity as a given. There is, therefore, room for producing revisionist histories of developing right-wing anti-statism that center gender. For example, more work could be done to center women’s labor, understood concerning their ideological contributions and the domestic work that made possible men’s participation in these groups. Additionally, while much has been written about women’s reproductive capacity concerning the white

supremacist right (Blee 2002; Belew 2019; Ferber 1998), an examination of anti-statist right-wing sexual politics—between men as well as concerning women—could significantly contribute to our understanding of the movement and its related groups. Finally, there is a need for both more granular, ethnographic accounts of women’s lived experiences of anti-statist right-wing groups and a more overarching, structural analysis of the specific factors that contribute to women’s support for the movement.

### 3. The Anti-Statist Right-Wing Belief System and Threats to the Protection of Women’s Rights

Taken as a whole, the anti-statist right-wing movement is characterized by a belief in the illegitimacy of the government. For those more traditionally affiliated with the militia movement, this results from the federal government’s occupation by a Zionist and/or global power (Gallaher 2003); for those on the sovereign Citizen side of the movement, it results from the federal government becoming a “corporation” (Berger 2016). While ostensibly concerned with limiting the authority, power, and scope of the federal government, where the federal government to be deemed illegitimate and its powers sharply constrained, the provision of rights afforded to women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ folks would be endangered.

Across the board, movement members believe that the federal government is the greatest threat to liberty. This belief is frequently articulated concerning one and/or all of three claims: (1) the Fourteenth Amendment is invalid (Berger 2016); (2) the highest legitimate level of authority is the county sheriff (Jackson 2019b); and (3) individuals have the right to “nullify” laws they view as unconstitutional (Jackson 2019b). Taken together, these three beliefs produce a political outlook that privileges the rights of only some individuals and offers extremely limited recourse for the protection of civil rights and liberties for women, people of color, and other historically marginalized and oppressed groups. Not all militia and patriot movement members ascribe to the belief that the Fourteenth Amendment is invalid, as sovereign citizens do.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a general agreement that the federal government is both tyrannical and illegitimate. By extension, any action the federal government takes to enforce and apply the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses in the Fourteenth Amendment to the states is likewise illegitimate.

Questioning the legitimacy of the Fourteenth Amendment renders vulnerable those who are most dependent on the safeguards it affords. For example, it is not difficult to see how anti-statist right-wing movement members could also view the passage and enforcement of federal legislation that affirmatively protects the rights and/or interests of women, racial minority groups, and (more recently) LGBTQ+ individuals, such as the 1964 Civil rights Act (CRA), the 1965 Voting rights Act (VRA), or the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), as all similarly unlawful. Even though applying Fourteenth Amendment protections to women has been uneven (Lapidus 2002), and the Constitutional status of the rights of women (among others) remain ill-defined in the absence of an Equal rights Amendment (MacKinnon 2014), in conjunction with federal laws, the Fourteenth Amendment remains the most effective vehicle for the promotion of gender equality. Despite their limitations in remedying pervasive and systemic inequalities, legislative acts like the CRA, VRA, and VAWA are the most effective means of advancing formal equality, guaranteeing minimal protections, and providing federally backed remedies for harms perpetrated against historically marginalized groups. Anti-statist arguments that disavow the legitimacy of the federal government and/or the Fourteenth Amendment do not need to directly aim at these rights and protections to threaten them. Rather, they may be simply collateral damage in a war against the tyranny of a strong federal government. Regardless of whether anti-statist groups intentionally target these rights and protections, they promote a political worldview that, if enacted, would be dangerous to women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Anti-statist right-wing thought also poses a challenge to the enforcement and protection of these rights by demanding the devolution of authority to the most local level of enforcement. As Sam Jackson has detailed, the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers

Association (CSPOA) argues that sheriffs should actively resist the enforcement of federal laws. He writes, “These ideas are framed as a defense of individual liberty against tyranny; in practice, CSPOA and others, who make similar arguments have encouraged county sheriffs to issue ultimatums to IRS officials and U.S. Marshals, suggesting that they should threaten to use their powers of arrest to prevent the enforcement of federal laws and court orders that CSPOA members view as violating the Constitution” (Jackson 2019a, p. 12). Arguments against the enforcement of federal law have tended to be framed in relation to gun rights (Jackson 2019b) and the refusal to recognize federal ownership of property as in the case of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation (Gallaher 2016). However, one need only recall the racial injustices perpetrated under the guise of “local authority”, including sharecropping and lynching, during Jim Crow (Farbman 2019, pp. 480–82) to conjure the potential and real dangers that such a devolution of law enforcement could entail for vulnerable populations.

Further representing the embrace of an ideology of decentralized and devoluted power and authority, anti-statist right-wing movements, such as the Three Percenters, have also promoted the idea of “popular nullification”. Sam Jackson (2019b) details how the founder of the Three Percenters, Mike Vanderboegh, promoted the idea that a refusal to observe gun control laws could be justified through a combination of “nullification” and the “frame appropriation” of civil disobedience. Proponents of the idea of popular nullification, Jackson explains, “argued that the nullity of a law flowed from the law’s substantive unconstitutionality, and thus nullity was an intrinsic quality of any unconstitutional law” (Jackson 2019b, p. 7). By virtue of the right to popular sovereignty, every individual is empowered to recognize the “intrinsic nullity” of law and thereby hold it invalid. From this standpoint, individual rights entitle the individual to effectively stand outside of and above the constitutional law.

Of course, popular nullification is incompatible with the rule of law; or as Jackson writes, “Radical understandings of the people as the final interpreters of the Constitution are incompatible with the dominant understanding of judicial supremacy in the US, where the Supreme Court is the final authority on what is and is not constitutional” (Jackson 2019b, p. 8). Despite this ideological inconsistency, the concept of popular nullification provides a justificatory schema for patriotism alongside a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of one’s government. It also provides a justificatory schema for refusing to recognize the legal rights and protections afforded to women. To illustrate the potential dangers that popular nullification can pose to women, one needs to look no further than the anti-abortion movement.

In her groundbreaking examination of the anti-abortion movement, Carol Mason (2002) details the crossover appeal and allegiances between extremist anti-abortion and anti-statist right-wing activists. While taking pains to maintain the distinctions between the two movements, Mason artfully identifies how anti-abortion activists draw on post-Vietnam War tropes of masculinity (defined in relation to the returning soldier-warrior) and an entitlement to exercise violence (as “defenders” of the nation/unborn) to justify their violation of the law when exercised against individuals and institutions, who provide access to safe and legal abortion. Drawing on the example of the “Olympic Park” anti-abortion bomber Eric Rudolph, who was embraced by the white supremacist and anti-statist Christian Identity movement, Mason writes, “His case exemplifies how New War culture connects opposition to abortion (such as blowing up a clinic) with militia practices (such as avoiding bank accounts and Social Security numbers) and racist or anti-Semitic beliefs (such as denouncing the Holocaust as a hoax)” (Mason 2002, p. 32). While anti-abortion activists frame the murder of physicians and the bombing of abortion clinics in terms of a defense of life, it is not difficult to see how their actions can be understood in terms of laying claim to a right to popular nullification.

A recent example, drawn from a protest outside Kentucky’s sole abortion clinic, may help to illustrate this point further. Writing for *Ms. Magazine*, Mason spotlights this trend, detailing how a uniformed police officer joined an anti-abortion protest in Louisville at

the end of February 2021. This action, [Mason \(2021\)](#) contends, should be understood in the context of an exhortation to “Ignore Roe”, made by Rusty Thompson, founder of Operation Save America, in 2016. In joining a protest that demands the unlawful closure of a *lawful* abortion-providing facility, the Kentucky law enforcement officer effectively aligned himself with those who argue that the law should be subverted.

The use of extremist violence against abortion providers is just one example of how popular nullification can disenfranchise and harm women’s rights and reproducing individuals. However, the threat to the rights of women and other vulnerable populations does not stop there. Going forward, we should be attendant to how popular nullification claims, in conjunction with the refusal to recognize Fourteenth Amendment rights to due process and equal protection, could be weaponized against women, members of the LGBTQ communities, and other members of protected classes, including, but not limited to religious, racial, and ethnic minorities. Moreover, we should view anti-statist demands for the devolution of power to the local level with the knowledge that similar arguments have historically been used to oppress and terrorize communities of color and to refuse the recognition and provision of rights to those who are not white and male. The anti-abortion actions of the Kentucky police officer are reminiscent of reports over in the summer of 2020 that law enforcement officers were refusing to respond to calls for help at a domestic violence shelter that had displayed a Black Lives Matter sign ([Knowles 2020](#)). While these are isolated events, they raise important questions about how the refusal to obey the law can be weaponized against women and people of color.

Recent legal scholarship has focused on the “paper terrorist” ([Loeser 2015](#)) and First Amendment ([Melle 2013](#)) strategies employed by sovereign citizens. This research importantly highlights how this group utilizes the courts even as it rejects their legitimacy. However, there is a pressing need to look further into how anti-statist right-wing actors envision the administration of decentralized authority. Scholars should be asking: what are the theoretical and real-world implications of “popular nullification” for the rights of women, LGBT individuals, Black Americans, and people of color? How may the decentralization of authority impact protections for victims of intimate partner, gender-based, and racial violence when local law enforcement is nonresponsive? How may “popular nullification” be wielded to advance white and male supremacist beliefs?

#### 4. The Threat of Violence against “Bad” Women

On 8 October 2020, the F.B.I announced it had arrested six members affiliated with a Michigan militia called the “Wolverine Watchmen” for plotting to kidnap Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer ([Bogel-Burroughs et al. 2020](#); [Perliger 2021](#)). Media accounts reported on the arrest of additional affiliates. They fleshed out the details of a thwarted plan that extended beyond the kidnapping of Whitmer to include the storming of the Michigan state capital and the kidnapping of the Democratic governor of Virginia, Ralph Northam ([Witsil 2020](#); [McCord 2020](#); [Perliger 2021](#)). Whitmer was allegedly referred to by militia members as a “tyrant b—h” in response to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions she had authorized. The militia members sought to “take her to Wisconsin and put her on trial for ‘treason’” ([Witsil 2020](#)). The Whitmer/Northam kidnapping plot reflects an attempt to operationalize the anti-statist ideologies detailed in the preceding section. However, the gendered language used by the militia members is also suggestive of how claims about the illegitimacy of the government make women especially vulnerable targets for anti-statist extremist violence.

Scholars of anti-statist right-wing movements identify masculinity as central to constructing political identity within these movements ([Cooter 2013](#); [Belew 2019](#); [Ferber 1998](#); [Gallaher 2003](#); [Mason 2002](#)). Some of these accounts have focused on producing masculine identity concerning war, drawing attention to the influence of WWII and the Vietnam War, on what Cooter terms producing “masculinized national identity”, Belew identifies as the “remasculinization of America”, and Mason, drawing on James William Gibson’s work, terms the “New War Culture”. While much of the emphasis on the “cult of the warrior”

(Mason 2002) is on producing an armed, militant, soldier mentality, the trope of “male protectionism” is necessarily wrapped up in the image of the man as a defender.

Focusing specifically on white power and white supremacist movements, Kathleen Blee (2002), Kathleen Belew (2019), and Abby Ferber (1998) have explored how the perceived need to reproduce white babies to guarantee the continued hegemony of the white race foments patriarchal traditionalist attitudes toward white women. Drawing on conservative Christian beliefs about the need for male headship and dominance and female submission, patriarchal traditionalism seeks to affirm the power and supremacy of the husband/father/man over the wife/child/woman. The man, as father/husband, is granted the status of provider and protector. At the same time, the wife/child is put in a position of being a subservient dependent. White women, who are drawn into this “protective” sphere, are simultaneously disempowered of agency while also accorded special status. Ferber’s work, in particular, identifies how white supremacists perceive feminists and “race traitors” as a threat to their continued existence.

Patriarchal traditionalist attitudes, which assert the supremacy of men and code submissive women as “good” and non-submissive women as “bad”, permeate anti-statist right-wing movements. As I discuss in the following section, even for those who are coded as “good”, patriarchal traditionalism offers a limited and restricted set of roles for women to occupy. For those coded as “bad”, the binary and exclusionary logic of patriarchal traditionalism construct a set of very real threats. Taken as the embodied representation of democratic and feminist political positions that tout equality and utilize the government as a means of achieving and upholding equal rights, Governor Whitmer is necessarily a “bad” woman. She is not only a political threat, as a representative of an illegitimate government, but also a gendered threat, as a woman, who is failing to perform her ascribed role. As such, she is exempted from the paternalistic protection accorded to “good” submissive women and subjected to the dual threat of political and sexual violence, guilty not only of treason but also of being a “tyrant b—h”.

In a comparative analysis of violence against women in politics in four continents, Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín persuasively argue “that violence against women in politics originates in structural violence, is carried out through cultural violence, and results in symbolic violence (understood as masculine dominance) against women” (Krook and Sanín 2020, p. 741). They find that attacks on women in politics “relegates them to second-class citizenship, threatening principles of gender equality” (Krook and Sanín 2020, p. 752). Following in the vein of their work, we should be attentive to how anti-statist male supremacism undermines democratic values and institutions, reproduces gender inequalities, and makes women the targets of not only symbolic but also physical violence.

In assessing the threat of anti-statist right-wing movements, we should be cognizant of the political and gendered registers in which the discourse of illegitimacy operates. Future research should address how anti-statist right-wing movements produce ideologies of exclusion that leave all of those who fail to perform their ascribed roles vulnerable to physical threats of violence and symbolic expulsion from the body politic.

### 5. Can “Good” Women Be Patriots?

However, what about “good” women? Can they occupy diverse positions within these binary categories and be seen as good producers and patriots? It is certainly tempting to read the actions of women like Ashli Babbitt, who was killed storming the Capitol on 6 January (Barry et al. 2021), and Felicia Konold, who was charged in connection with the insurgency and has since claimed she is a member of the men’s-only Proud Boys (Hegeman 2021), as suggesting that women can, indeed, be full-fledged members of anti-statist right-wing movements. However, a more accurate answer, I suggest, is complicated and requires that we view the place and role of women in anti-statist movements from a critical vantage point.

Despite the seeming ideological hostility to women of the anti-statist right, and while women are underrepresented within the movement, they nonetheless operate within and



exercise influence on anti-statist right-wing groups. Yet, their place within these groups is contingent and contested, giving rise to the need for further exploration.

In their book, *Right-Wing Populism in America* (2000), Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons identify “producerism” as an organizing logic of the populist right. They explain that producerism is “a doctrine that champions the so-called producers in society against both “unproductive” elites and subordinate groups defined as lazy or immoral” (Berlet and Lyons 2000, p. 38). Producerism, they argue, has always been tied to white supremacy and serves to reinforce narratives of anti-Semitic, anti-Black, and anti-immigrant exclusion.

In a more recent examination of the right-wing, Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes have explored how the categories of “producer”, “parasite”, and “patriot” are “racialized categories” that are used to “differentiat[e] those groups deemed self-reliant, autonomous, and worthy of social protection from those who are dependent, debased, and worthy of abandonment and disavowal” (HoSang and Lowndes 2019, p. 4). Importantly, HoSang and Lowndes show that these categories and accompanying binaries are not static. Rather, they are malleable and can accommodate racial differences, even as they serve to reinforce white supremacy. Notably, the inclusion of conservative people of color, HoSang and Lowndes argue, reflects their status as “idealized subjects of the marketized and militarized nation” (HoSang and Lowndes 2019, p. 77). In this final section, I suggest that we should borrow from HoSang and Lowndes to begin to articulate the complicated place of women within anti-statist right-wing movements as they move between and within these categories in ways that serve to both reinforce and transform them.

As several excellent studies have shown, women can, and frequently are, at the vanguard of the far-right (Blee 2002; Jeansonne 1996; Darby 2020). However, their actions and commitments to right-wing ideologies and movements are almost always viewed through the lens of patriarchal traditionalism. As Blee and Creasap explain, “Once mobilized, women face a complicated gender environment in right-wing movements. Despite their increasing numbers, right-wing men still view their women comrades as motivated by familial or maternal responsibilities rather than by ideological zeal”. (Blee and Creasap p. 278). To return to the earlier binary identification attributed to patriarchal traditionalism, “bad” women are those who: fail to produce (white children) or are economically over-productive and take men’s jobs; are parasitical because they are economically dependent on men or the state (de Coning and Ebin Forthcoming), and are incapable of being true patriots because they are not soldiers and/or they express fealty to an illegitimate government. Women can be viewed as “good” producers—as contributors of children and caretakers for their men—but only within the narrowly circumscribed sphere of the domestic. Moreover, the position of “good” producer is almost always also racialized. The reproductive role is implicitly inscribed with long-established associations of whiteness with “good” motherhood or explicitly linked to the reproduction of the white race.

What then should we make of the rare women who embody the role of a patriot? It would seem that there may be space within the patriot designation for women as martyrs. In the previously mentioned standoff at Ruby Ridge, which was prompted by a federal investigation of Randy Weaver for the illegal sale of firearms, Weaver’s wife, Vicki, was shot and killed by an FBI sniper. The importance of Ruby Ridge in forming the anti-statist right-wing movement cannot be overstated. The deaths that occurred as a result of the standoff “have taken on symbolic importance for the white separatist movement and law enforcement because they created heroes and martyrs, who provide a standard against which others can measure themselves” (Dobratz et al. 2003, p. 331). On one hand, Vicki Weaver was constructed as a “good” woman, the keeper of the house and children; on the other hand, she was portrayed as the intellectually and spiritually dominant force in the Weaver household, responsible for the family’s deeply racist Christian belief system (Dobratz et al. 2003). Regardless of the framing, Vicki Weaver emerged from the standoff enclosed in a body bag and as a potent symbol of the tyranny of the federal government (Neiwert 1999, p. 67).

Unlike Vicki Weaver, Ashli Babbitt was not killed by a sniper in her home while holding an infant. Rather, she was killed as she, along with hundreds of other insurgents, breached the Capitol building in an attempt to halt the certification of the winner of the United States presidential election by the legislature. Babbitt's actions put her, quite literally, at the front of an anti-statist mobilization. Moreover yet, her death may well follow a similar trajectory to Vicki Weaver's in far-right mythology. Should this occur and Babbitt is sanctified as a martyr, it will likely be accompanied by a general reframing of her as a "good" woman. Already we see this process taking place in media accounts of her life, which have focused on humanizing her and constructing her as a sympathetic figure with a family who loved her (Barry et al. 2021; Jamison et al. 2021).

The sacrifice required to become a "good" patriot-martyr is extreme. However, even suffering a violent death at the hands of government agents is not a guarantee of inclusion for all women. Take, for example, the case of Korryn Gaines, a Black woman who identified as a sovereign Citizen and was killed in a confrontation with police.<sup>4</sup> Gaines encountered the police when they came to her home to serve her a warrant for failing to appear in court for a traffic violation; she refused entry to the police and indicated she was armed. Roughly six hours later, she was shot and killed by police (Lowery 2016). Like Vicki Weaver, Gaines ended her standoff in a body bag. In the aftermath of her death, examinations of her social media accounts indicated she identified with the sovereign Citizen movement (Anderson and Mbakwe 2016; Crockett 2016).

While Gaines's name appears on a comprehensive list of sovereign citizens, who engaged in violent confrontations with law enforcement compiled by the scholar Christine Sarteschi (2020), I was not introduced to her story, not through the scholarship on anti-statist movements. Rather, it was in *Making All Black Lives Matter*, Barbara Ransby's (2018) history of the ongoing Movement for Black Lives, that I first encountered Gaines. Ransby details how Gaines was killed after a seven-hour standoff and denounced as crazy, while the Malheur Occupation was allowed to drag on for over a month without a shot fired. The occupiers were identified as economically aggrieved patriots (for Malheur occupation, see also Gallaher 2016). Gaines is not widely recognized by the anti-statist right as one of its female martyrs; rather, she is claimed by the Movement for Black Lives as a representative of the racialized and gendered police violence Black women face. Thus, it would seem that, while the category of patriot can accommodate racial difference and gender difference to some degree, only some women are afforded the capacity to become "idealized subjects" in their performance of the martyred patriot.

Given the influence and importance of masculinized tropes of the warrior/soldier in forming anti-statist right-wing movements, it should come as little surprise that the category of patriot largely excludes women. Future research should be done to further explicate the conditions under which some women may operate as patriots outside of the constraints imposed by either martyrdom or domesticity. Moreover, we should interrogate how some women are and are not granted access to the category of patriot and what distinguishes those who are martyred from those who are not. Additionally, more remains to be understood about what draws women to groups that either implicitly or explicitly reject them. Felicia Konold's claims of membership in the Proud Boys raises interesting questions, as the Proud Boys have staked much of their identity on being an exclusively male organization (Hegeman 2021). If Konold's assertions are borne out, her case may open the door to further investigations into the motivations behind women's membership in and support of anti-statist right-wing groups.

## 6. Conclusions

The heterogeneity of anti-statist right-wing groups imposes limitations on any analysis that seeks to synthesize the ideologies and threats at work within the movement as a whole. By flattening these groups and treating them as parts of a whole, I have necessarily omitted important distinctions and differences within and between these groups. These distinctions are worthy of our attention. There is a need for in-depth, granular studies of the threat to

and roles for women created by discrete groups. My intent in generalizing the ideological and membership particularities of these groups has been: (1) to show male supremacism is a constitutive part of the anti-statist right and all of its corresponding movements; and (2) to identify the significant and real threats posed to women as well as people of color and other historically marginalized groups whose rights are, in large part, dependent on the federal government. As we enter into a new phase of right-wing movement building and mobilization, scholars and activists alike should seek to better understand male supremacism within the anti-statist right and take the dangers of gendered violence from anti-statist right-wing groups seriously.

From the origins of the modern militia and sovereign citizens movements to the shared conviction that the federal government is illegitimate, the anti-statist right is premised on a belief in the supremacy of men over women. The threat of violence to women and those who “fail” to perform their ascribed gender or sexual orientation is never far behind, and it stems directly from the political and social views of the anti-statist right. The entrenched categories of “producer”, “patriot”, and “parasite” are also intimately and inextricably tied to racial hierarchies and supremacist beliefs. Whether as a result of popular nullification and the devolution of law enforcement to the hyper-local, the binary construction of “good” and “bad” women, who are worthy or unworthy of protection, or the repudiation of the federal government’s obligation to enforce Congressional legislation and the Fourteenth Amendment, the anti-statist right-wing presents several legal and political challenges to the provision and enforcement of equal rights for women and members of historically marginalized and oppressed groups. Future research should engage not only with the dangers to equal rights and the symbolic and real threats against women posed by anti-statist ideology and activism but also with the threats posed by anti-statist right-wing women to the state and the rights of others.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A recent analysis based on 377 individuals arrested or charged concerning the attack on the Capitol found “like earlier protesters, they are 95 percent white and 85 percent male”. The analysis also found that the protesters were more affluent than the researchers had anticipated and were motivated by xenophobia, not economic precarity ([Pape 2021](#)).
- <sup>2</sup> According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups reached an all-time high in 2018 and decreased in 2019 and 2020. This decrease, however, was accompanied by a consolidation of right-wing groups and the move to online activity prompted, in no small part, by the coronavirus pandemic ([Southern Poverty Law Center SPLC](#); [Jones et al. 2020](#)).
- <sup>3</sup> sovereign citizens hold that the Fourteenth Amendment “created a form of second-class citizenship, less empowered and more subject to the federal government, which is seen as distinct from the state-centered form of citizenship articulated in the Constitution”. Following a set of obscure procedures, sovereigns further believe they can “opt-out of Fourteenth Amendment citizenship” ([Berger 2016](#), p. 3).
- <sup>4</sup> It should be noted that there is a Black contingent of sovereign citizens, who identify as “Moorish sovereign citizens”. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Moorish sovereigns espouse an interpretation of sovereign doctrine that African Americans constitute an elite class within American society with special rights and privileges that convey on them a sovereign immunity placing them beyond federal and state authority” ([Southern Poverty Law Center SPLC](#)). Not enough is known about Gaines’s identification to assert whether she identified with the Moorish sovereign Citizen off-shoot group. As [Sarteschi \(2020\)](#) notes, identifying the only two scholarly articles on the topic, there is a real dearth of scholarship on the group altogether.

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