



Right-Wing Protest in the United States, 2017 to 2022

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Abstract

The past few years have seen a resurgence of right-wing demonstrations in the United States. Using new protest event data collected by the Crowd Counting Consortium, this visualization presents monthly trends in the size and count of protests by topic between 2017 and 2022. Conservative protest in the first three years was at a notably low level but with some very large events and a focus on abortion and gun rights. Protests swelled, starting in 2020, with demonstrations against coronavirus disease 2019 restrictions and in support of police officers, followed by election fraud rallies. Finally, 2022 was marked by lower levels of participation overall and increased events targeting LGBTQ+ rights.

Keywords

social movements, right-wing politics, visualizations

The election of Donald Trump began a relatively unprecedented era of political protest in the United States (Pressman et al. 2022). Although protests associated with progressive causes, from the Women's March in 2016 to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020, were the most prominent, conservative street activism also surged. Right-wing movements have long been a focus of social movement scholars (Blee and Creasap 2010), and their resurgence increases the importance of understanding these activities. This visualization plots the size and count of the conservative protest by issue and month to help understand the magnitude, variety of themes, and temporal shifts of right-wing activism between 2017 and 2022.

Protest data shown in Figure 1 are from the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC), which collects and codes events from various sources, including news reports, social media, and organizational website (Fisher et al. 2019). I include nonelectoral events coded as right-wing along with protests against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions. CCC events are categorized on protester claims and their alignment with political parties.¹ I grouped each protest event into a broad category of the reported issues and claims, such as abortion or gun control. I then aggregated

each issue's number of events and total size by month. The final data set includes 16,027 events.²

The visualization is inspired by the demography population pyramid. It displays monthly events grouped on the left and total event size on the right, both categorized by issue. The top represents the most recent period.

From this visualization, we can identify three periods of right-wing demonstrations spanning six years, each labeled in the figure. In the first period, from 2017 to 2019, protests focused on two conservative issues that have animated the right for decades, abortion and firearms. Except for a three-month surge in 2018, the monthly protest numbers were relatively low, with the annual "March for Life" event in Washington, D.C., drawing the most participants. The January 2018 event was an outlier with approximately 350,000 attendees.

The second era, which started in early 2020, saw a significant increase in events and activism on multiple new issues.

²Data and Stata replication code are available at <https://osf.io/wdutf/>.

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¹The supplemental file details the process for event inclusion along with the details of categorizing protests into categories on the basis of the protesters' claims.



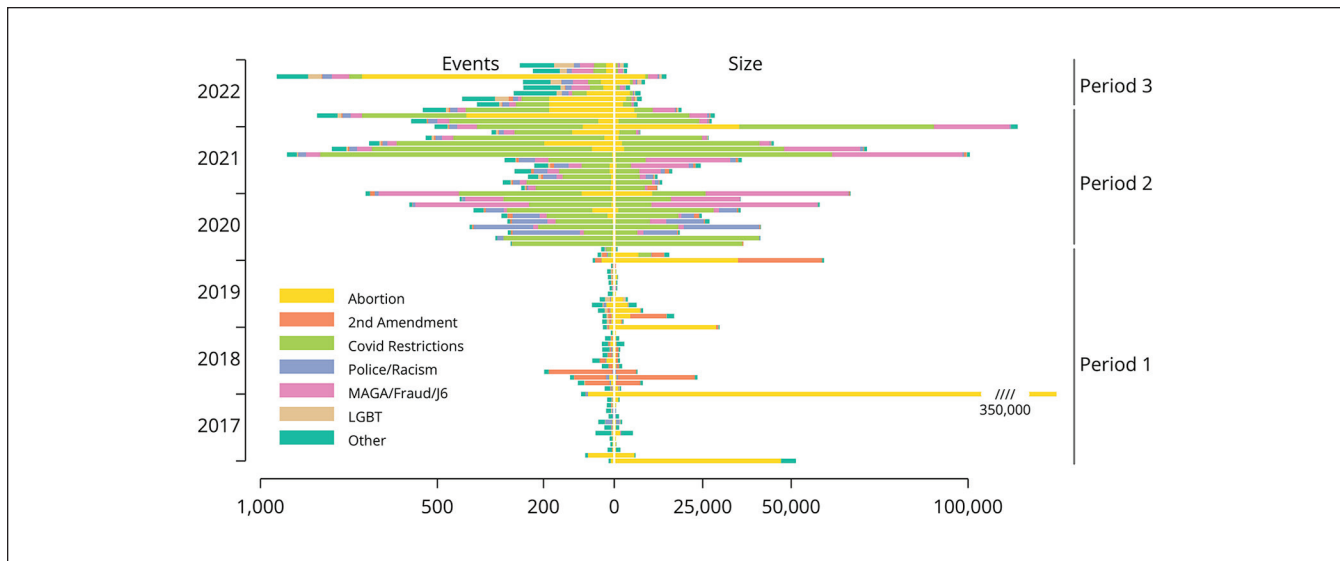


Figure 1. Monthly right-wing protests in the United States, 2017 to 2022. The event count is shown on the left, and the total number of participants is on the right. Bars are coded by color on the basis of the event’s topic: abortion (goldenrod); COVID-19 restrictions (lime green); police/racism (periwinkle); “Make America Great Again”/election fraud/January 6, 2021 (blush); LGBT (sandstone); and other (turquoise). Data are from the Crowd Counting Consortium.

These included protests against COVID-19 restrictions, in support of police, against Black Lives Matter, for Donald Trump’s agenda, and against election fraud. The number of events increased 10-fold from an average of 30 per month in the first period to 314 per month over the next two years. The median monthly attendance also changed dramatically, rising from 1,721 to 31,266.

In the third period, starting at the beginning of 2022, events continued to occur frequently, with a median count of 331 per month but with monthly attendance averaging 7,443 participants, which is lower than the second period but still higher than the first era. The growing number of antitransgender protests also marked this period, although these events did not draw large crowds compared with other issues.

This visualization provides a unique perspective on the rise and fall of conservative street activism in the United States between 2017 and 2022. More generally, this visualization style highlights these temporal trends in protests and provides opportunities for additional explorations. Comparing event counts and sizes simultaneously allows us to examine movement dynamics because the number of events and participants can contribute independently to a movement’s momentum and potential impact (Biggs 2018).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biography

Neal Caren is an associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His current research is on contemporary U.S. social movements and the uses of media data for understanding movement processes. He is the coauthor of *Rough Draft of History: A Century of US Social Movements in the News* (Princeton University Press, 2022). His work has also appeared in journals such as *American Sociological Review*, *Mobilization*, *Social Forces*, and *Social Problems*.