Investigating Personality and Demographic Contributors to Support for Violent Extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Executive Summary

The current research examines the demographic and psychological predictors of support for violent extremism within a nationally representative sample of adults in Aotearoa New Zealand. Against a global backdrop of rising lone-actor and ideologically motivated violence, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature by analysing which individual-level demographic and personality factors predict support for violent extremism. To do so, we utilised data collected during 2023-2024 involving 32,857 adults from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS). We assessed the relationship between a range of demographic and personality variables with support for violent extremism. Data revealed that overall support for violent extremism was relatively low in the population with mean levels below the midpoint on the scale. However, significant demographic and personality predictors were identified. Specifically, being male, younger, more educated, and more left-wing were associated with *slightly increased* support for violent extremism. Similarly, higher openness to experience, narcissism, and vengeful-rumination predicted *slightly higher* support for violent extremism, while higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and self-control were associated with *slightly lesser* support for violent extremism. Taken together, this research demonstrates that support for violent extremism is influenced by a confluence of demographic and personality factors, although each had small contributing roles in an individual's susceptibility to support violent extremism.

Introduction

Violent extremism (VE), a manifestation of political violence, is a global concern as violent terror attacks result in tens of thousands of deaths worldwide each year. For example, the Sahel region, including Burkino Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan, has experienced a large increase in VE resulting in thousands of deaths each year since 2018 (Marivoet et al., 2024). Even relatively stable democracies have witnessed an increase in VE. For example, the United States has witnessed the assassination of a healthcare CEO (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024), the attempted assassination of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump (Holliday et al., 2024), the January 6th 2021 insurrection (Kleinfeld, 2021), and both White nationalist (e.g., 2022 Buffalo attack targeting African Americans), and Islamic extremist terror attacks (e.g., 2025 New Orleans attack) against civilians. VE also no longer exists in the acts of organised groups. Instead, it increasingly involves lone actors who become radicalised online by themselves. This was demonstrated in Aotearoa New Zealand when on March 15th, 2019, two Christchurch mosques were targeted and 51 worshippers were murdered by a 'lone gunman', radicalised online (Crothers & O'Brien, 2020).

Such trends of individual radicalisation highlight the importance of understanding what factors predict individual level support for VE. Rather than solely focus on the characteristics of organised extremist groups, it is important to understand what background factors increase an individual's support for VE. In the current report, we examine how unique aspects about an individual's personality and demographic background predict their support for VE using a nationally representative sample of adults from Aotearoa New Zealand.

Demographic predictors of political violence

Previous research has examined the role of various demographic factors in influencing support for VE. Some demographic factors are more consistently associated with increased support for VE, while others reveal more mixed findings. For example, being young and male are consistently associated with higher levels of support for VE across a myriad of international contexts (Armaly & Enders, 2024; Bartusevičius et al., 2020; Hayes & McAllister, 2005; Heaney, 2020; Piazza, 2024; Vergani et al., 2023; Wintemute et al., 2023). By contrast, other demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, religiosity, place of residence, and education reveal more mixed evidence in support for VE. For example, while a meta-analysis by Jahnke et al. (2023) finds a small positive association between lower SES and VE outcomes, context appears to matter such as whether a country is a stable democracy or not (Blair et al., 2012). Similarly, while religiosity is associated with support for VE in the US (Armaly & Enders, 2024), it is unrelated to support for VE organisations in Pakistan (Christine et al., 2009). Therefore, the current study reports on the role of all available demographic factors including age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, political ideology, place of residence, and religiosity on support for VE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Personality predictors of support for political violence

Another area of consideration when considering an individual's susceptibility for VE is considering the influence of their personality. Personality can be viewed across multiple dimensions including the widely studied big six dimensions of personality including extraversion[1], neuroticism[2], openness[3], conscientiousness[4], agreeableness[5], and honesty-

[1] Characterised by sociability, leadership, and exhibition (Sibley et al., 2011).
[2] Characterised by anxiety, insecurity, and lack of calmness (Sibley et al., 2011).
[3] Characterised by curiosity, imaginativeness, and lack of need for certainty (Sibley et al., 2011).
[4] Characterised by diligence, organisation, and attention to detail (Sibley et al., 2011).
[5] Characterised by tolerance, forgiveness, and low quarrelsomeness (Sibley et al., 2011).

humility[6] that forms the basis for human personality (Funder, 2024). In the domain of VE, recent personality research has examined the role of the Dark Triad traits that represent socially undesirable and harmful aspects of personality. Specifically, the dark triad traits of narcissism[7], psychopathy[8], and Machiavellianism[9] directly predict greater support for VE (Nai & Young, 2024). Similarly, Gøtzsche-Astrup (2021) observed that stronger partisan identities drive intentions to engage in VE, but only among partisans with high dark triad scores. This suggests that dark traits may amplify the effects of partisan loyalty on violent tendencies. However, less studied is the way in which the basic building blocks of human personality, or the universal dimensions of the Big Six personality traits, are associated with support for VE. In the limited research available on the topic, honesty-humility has been associated with reduced support for political violence (Nai & Young, 2024), indicating that this trait may act as a protective factor against extremist tendencies. However, far more research is needed on the topic, especially as none directly examines the connection between personality and support for VE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Beyond the role of the Big Six personality traits, others have examined the role of differing personality and individual dimensions in support for VE. For example, Pauwels et al. (2020) highlighted the role of low self-control and exposure to online extremist content in fostering self-reported political aggression. However, previous research has not directly examined how trait levels of self-control relate to support for VE. A similar gap remains within the literature as the role of perfectionism, a personality disposition defined by extremely high standards for performance and a tendency to be overly critical in self-evaluations (Macedo et al.,

[6] Characterised by fairness, sincerity, and lack of entitlement and narcissism (Sibley et al., 2011).
[7] Characterised by cynical worldview, lack of morality, and manipulativeness (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).
[8] Characterised by deficits in affect (i.e., callousness) and self-control (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).
[9] Characterised by a clash between a grandiose personality and underlying insecurity (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

2014), has yet to be studied with regards to predicting support for VE. Similarly, the role of vengeful rumination, which refers to excessive ruminative thinking about past offences (Berry et al., 2005), is yet to be explored.

The current research builds on previous work to examine how both demographic and personality factors predict support for VE. Specifically, here we examine the contribution of all available demographic factors and the Big Six personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty-humility), trait self-control, perfectionism, and vengeful rumination predict support for VE. Understanding these relationships is critical as individual-level psychological factors offer key insights into *who* endorses VE. We do this using a nationally representative sample of adults in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Method

Participants

The current study used data from the Time 15 wave of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), a longitudinal national probability sample of adults in New Zealand. This specific wave of the survey was chosen as it was the only wave currently available that included data on support for political violence. Time 15 included responses from 32,857 adults in Aotearoa New Zealand, including 20,619 women (62.75%), 11,899 men (36.21%), and 339 gender non-binary people (1.03%). Participants were 18 years or over with a mean age of 52.78 years (SD = 16.77). With regards to ethnicity, 29,613 people identified as European (90.13%), 3,119 as Māori (9.49%), 649 were Pacific Nations peoples (1.98%), and 1,774 identified with an Asian ethnic group (5.40%). Note that people could identify with multiple ethnic groups and therefore could be counted multiple times. Education was coded using the New Zealand

Qualifications Authority scheme, which ranged from 0 (none) to 10 (doctoral degree or equivalent) and revealed a range of responses (M = 5.69, SD = 2.73). Deprivation provided an index of the extent to which someone lived in a more or less economically deprived neighbourhood. This was coded using the New Zealand Deprivation index for the meshblock level (approx. 100 person-sized geographic units), with a decile rank from 1 (low) 10 (high; M = 4.76, SD = 2.71) (Atkinson, Salmond & Crampton, 2019). Socioeconomic status (M = 60.05, SD = 16.56) was scored from 10 (low) to 90 (high) using the New Zealand Socioeconomic Index, which assigned a score based on occupation and derived from census data (Fahy, Lee, & Milne, 2017). Of the 32,857 people sampled, 10,646 were religious (32.40%); 22,393 were parents (68.15%); 22,291 had a romantic partner (67.84%); 22,485 were employed (68.43%); and 25,461 were born in New Zealand (77.49%).

Materials

Demographic Measures

Demographic measures used were included as part of the NZAVS (Sibley, 2024). Age was assessed by the following questions, “What is your age?" and “When is your date of birth?". Gender was assessed by asking participants to respond using an open-ended question, “What is your gender?", with participants who responded as “Male" being coded as “1" and “Not Male" coded as “0". Participants’ level of education was measured by an 11-point ordinal scale based on the New Zealand Qualification Framework, from 0 = no qualification to 10 = doctoral degree.

Ethnicity was assessed using the item, “Which ethnic group(s) do you belong to? (tick the box or boxes that apply to you)". Participants chose from: New Zealand European, Māori, Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tongan, Niuean, Chinese, Indian, Dutch, Japanese, Tokelauan, or they could state an alternative ethnicity. Participants were then categorised following the New

Zealand Census groups: European, Māori, Pacific Peoples, Asian, MELAA (Middle Eastern/Latin American/African), or Other. For the purpose of this project, we only focus on the categories of Māori, European, Asian, and Pacific as these included responses from a sufficiently large sample to make confident assessments.

NZAVS participants were also asked, “What is your relationship status?" with those who reported having a partner coded as “1" and those who did not were coded as “0". To measure religiousness, participants were asked, “Do you identify with a religion and/or spiritual group?". “Yes" responses were coded as “1" and “No" were coded as “0". Participants also provided their addresses, which allowed for identification of whether they reside in ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ areas using the Urban Rural classification of Stats NZ. And finally, socioeconomic status was scored from 10 (low) to 90 (high) using the New Zealand Socioeconomic Index, which gave participants a score based on occupation and derived from census data (Sibley, 2024). Finally, participants were asked on a 1=7 scale: “Please rate how politically left-wing versus right-wing you see yourself as being.” with 1=Extremely Left-Wing and 7=Extremely Right-Wing.

Personality Measures

Big-Six Personality: Big-Six personality facets (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, honesty-humility, openness, and neuroticism) were measured by using the MiniIPIP6 (Sibley et al. 2011). Ratings ranged from 1 = very inaccurate to 7 = very accurate. See Appendix 1 for the full scale.

Vengeful rumination: Ascertained using the mean of three items. The first was adapted from Caprara (1986); “Sometimes I can’t sleep because of thinking about past wrongs I have suffered.” The second item, “I can usually forgive and forget when someone does me wrong” (reverse coded) was adapted from Berry et al., (2005). The third item, developed for the NZAVS,

is “I find myself regularly thinking about past times that I have been wronged.” The items were measured on a scale from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate); $\alpha = 0.69$.

Narcissism/psychological entitlement: Assessed using the mean of a two-item measure adapted from Campbell et al. (2004): “[I] feel entitled to more of everything” and “[I] deserve more things in life”. The items were measured on a scale from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate; $\alpha = 0.69$).

Self-control: Assessed using the mean of a two-item scale adapted from Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004): “In general, I have a lot of self-control”, and “I wish I had more self-control” (reverse-coded). The items were measured on a scale from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate); $\alpha = 0.65$.

Perfectionism: Three-item scale adapted from Rice, Richardson, and Tueller (2014): “Doing my best never seems to be enough”, “My performance rarely measures up to my standards”, and “I am hardly ever satisfied with my performance.” The items were measured on a scale from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate); $\alpha = 0.80$.

Support for violence extremism was ascertained using the single item adapted from Nivette et al. (2022) and used in other research (Bilali, 2022): It is sometimes necessary to use violence to fight against political, ideological, or social agendas that are unjust’. Ratings ranged from 1 = Strong Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

Design

This project examined predictors of support for VE using data from the NZAVS. A multiple regression was carried out in order to examine the concurrent association between various demographic and personality factors with support for VE. The predictor variables were: age, gender, deprivation, socio-economic index, ethnicity, religiosity, education, political

ideology, parent status, partner status, employment status, urban-rural status, born in New Zealand, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, honesty-humility, neuroticism, self-control, narcissism, perfectionism, and vengeful rumination. The outcome variable was support for VE.

Results

The mean sample score for endorsement of the item on support for violent extremism was 2.66 (*SD* = 1.78) with a possible range from 1 to 7. See Table 1 for a summary of means broken down by age, ethnicity, and gender.

Table 1. *Means of support of political violence*

Category	*M*	*SD*
Overall sample mean	2.66	1.78
Gender		
Women	2.36	1.62
Men	3.14	1.90
Ethnicity		
European Ethnicity	2.64	1.77
Māori Ethnicity	2.71	1.80
Pacific Ethnicity	2.76	1.84
Asian Ethnicity	3.08	1.85

Birth year band		
1900-1940	2.59	1.75
1941-1945	2.45	1.67
1946-1950	2.41	1.72
1951-1955	2.46	1.73
1956-1960	2.40	1.70
1961-1965	2.41	1.68
1966-1970	2.48	1.70
1971-1975	2.59	1.72
1976-1980	2.76	1.75
1981-1985	2.83	1.78
1986-1990	2.98	1.83
1991-1995	3.27	1.90
1996-2000	3.23	1.88
2001-2005	3.42	1.86

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine predictors of support for VE. First in terms of demographic variables, support for political violence was predicted by being male ($\beta = .206$, $p < .001$), while age had a negative relationship ($\beta = -.090$, $p < .001$) suggesting

people were less likely to support political violence as they got older. Higher educational attainment was associated with greater support for political violence (β = .042, $p < .001$). Furthermore, more left-leaning political orientation was a significant predictor of support for VE (β = -.109, $p < .001$). All of these effect sizes are considered small.

With regards to personality factors, support for political violence was predicted by higher levels of openness to experience (β = .085, $p < .001$) and higher levels of narcissism (β = .070, $p < .001$). Conversely, the higher participants scored on self-control (β = -.031, $p < .001$), conscientiousness (β = -.063, $p < .001$), and agreeableness (β = -.081, $p < .001$), the lower their support for political violence. Support for VE was also predicted by higher vengeful rumination (β = .028, $p = .001$). These are also all considered to be small effect sizes. These results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Results of multiple regression predicting support for political violence*

	β	B	SE	Est./S.E.
Gender	0.206	0.748	0.028	26.269**
Age	-0.090	-0.010	0.001	-9.668**
Born in New Zealand	-0.009	-0.040	0.033	-1.214
Partner	0.002	0.007	0.031	0.213

Parent	-0.017	-0.062	0.033	-1.843
Deprivation	0.003	0.002	0.005	0.384
Religious Identification	-0.015	-0.058	0.029	-2.023
Socioeconomic Status	-0.020	-0.002	0.001	-2.291
Urban	-0.012	-0.000	0.000	-1.649
Education	0.042	0.030	0.006	4.801**
Political Orientation (Left-Right)	-0.109	-0.139	0.010	-13.539**
Asian Ethnicity	0.011	0.085	0.072	1.174
European Ethnicity	0.005	0.030	0.059	0.519
Māori Ethnicity	-0.004	-0.023	0.045	-0.504
Pacific Ethnicity	-0.005	-0.063	0.097	-0.652
Agreeableness	-0.081	-0.141	0.014	-10.102**

Conscientiousness	-0.063	-0.103	0.013	-7.748**
Extraversion	-0.010	-0.014	0.011	-1.334
Neuroticism	0.016	0.024	0.013	1.837
Openness	0.085	0.130	0.012	10.984**
Honesty-Humility	-0.014	-0.021	0.020	-1.035
Narcissism	0.070	0.098	0.018	5.289**
Self-Control	-0.031	-0.038	0.010	-3.656**
Vengeful Rumination	0.028	0.037	0.012	3.188*

Note. * $p < .01$, ** , $p < .001$.

Summary and Policy Implications

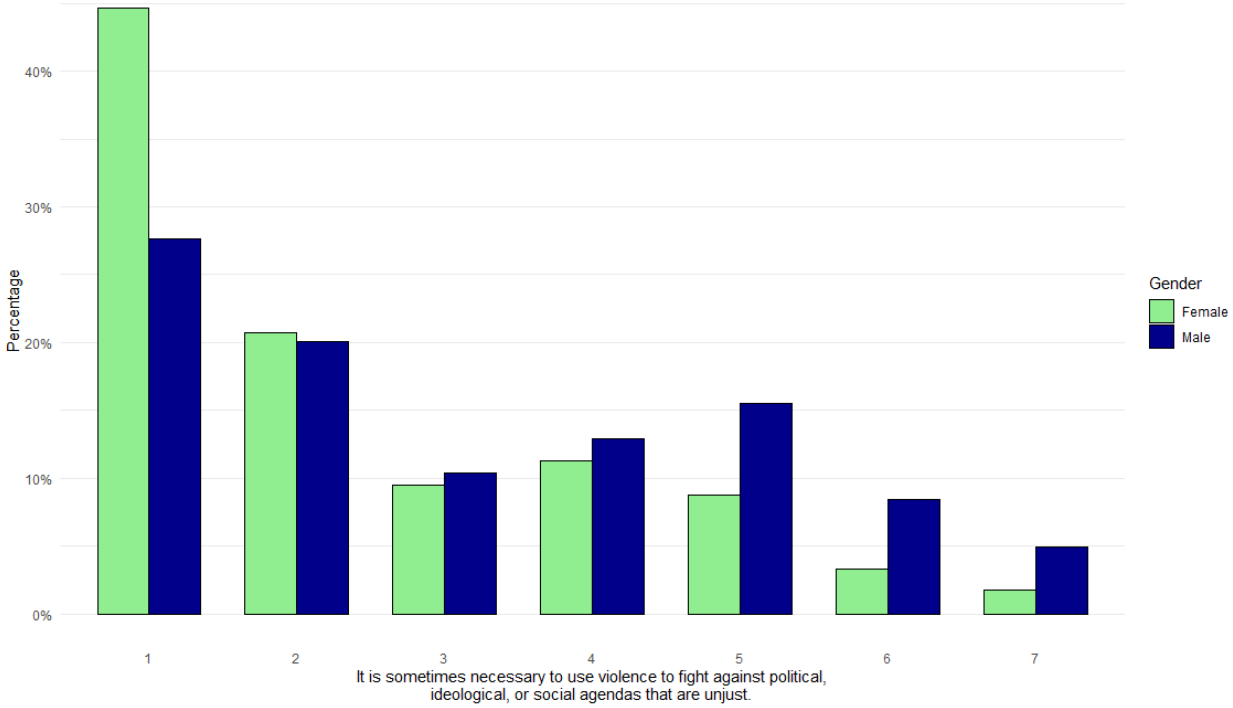
This study examined the demographic and personality factors associated with support for violent extremism within a nationally representative sample of adults in Aotearoa New Zealand. The analysis indicates that overall support remains relatively low with mean levels below the mid-point on the scale. However, support for violent extremism is not uniformly distributed across the population with being male, younger, more educated, and left-wing self-identification as having a small but significant relationship with support for VE. Among these, being male

revealed a larger effect than the others, although this too revealed what would be considered a small effect size.

Regarding personality traits, variables which uniquely contribute to support for VE are a higher degree of openness to experience, vengeful-rumination, and narcissism, which all predicted increased support for VE, while the traits of self-control, conscientiousness, and agreeableness were identified as protective factors, each demonstrating a significant negative relationship with endorsements of political violence. Once again, these personality traits all revealed what are considered small effect sizes suggesting none of our demographic and personality characteristics are large predictors of support for violent extremism.

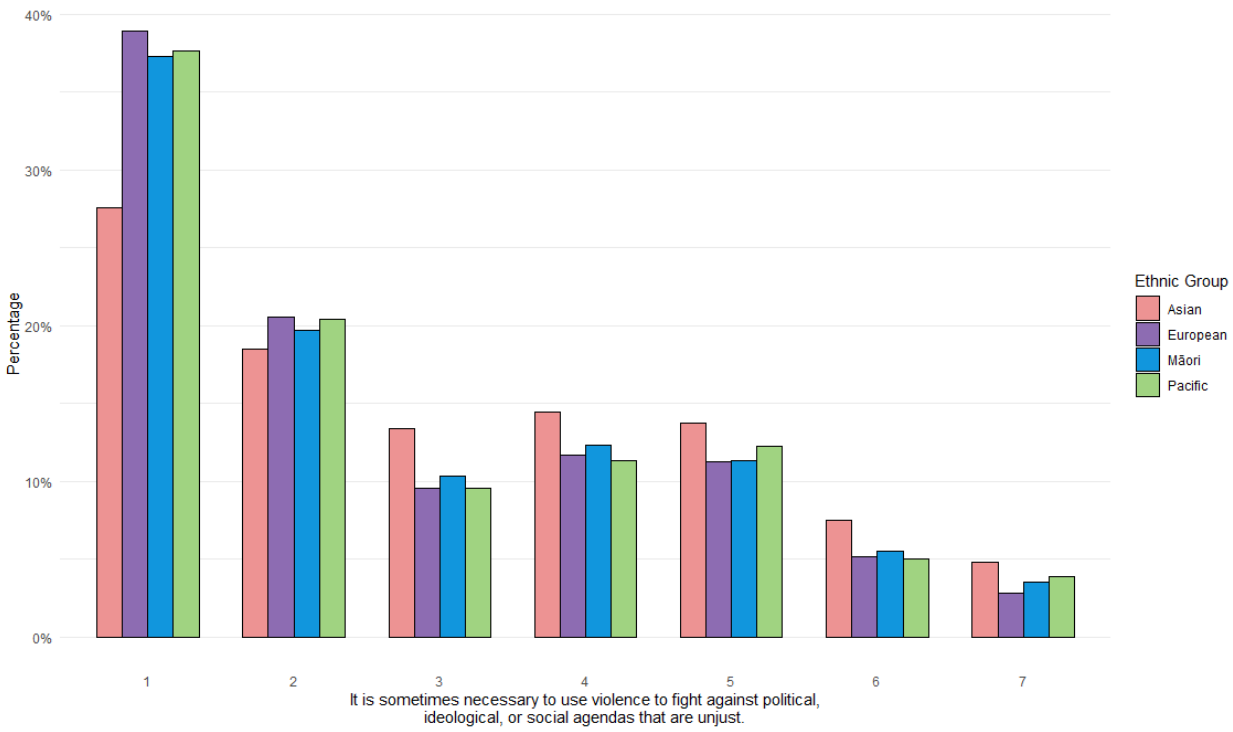
Taken together, this data from a large national sample of adults in Aotearoa New Zealand reveals that support for violent extremism remains low within the larger population. Moreover, no single demographic factor or personality characteristic is a clear red flag in predicting support for violent extremism. Instead, we find that a host of demographic factors including being male, younger, more educated, and left-wing self-identified are small but significant predictors of support for violent extremism. Similarly, being narcissistic, high in vengeful rumination, open to experience, and low in self-control, conscientiousness, and agreeableness are small but significant personality characteristics associated with support for violent extremism. This data suggests that the general sympathy for violent extremism and political violence is quite low within the general adult population of Aotearoa New Zealand and both demographic and personality factors play a small role in explaining what appetite there is for tolerating political violence and violent extremism.

Figure 1. *Mean support for political violence by gender*



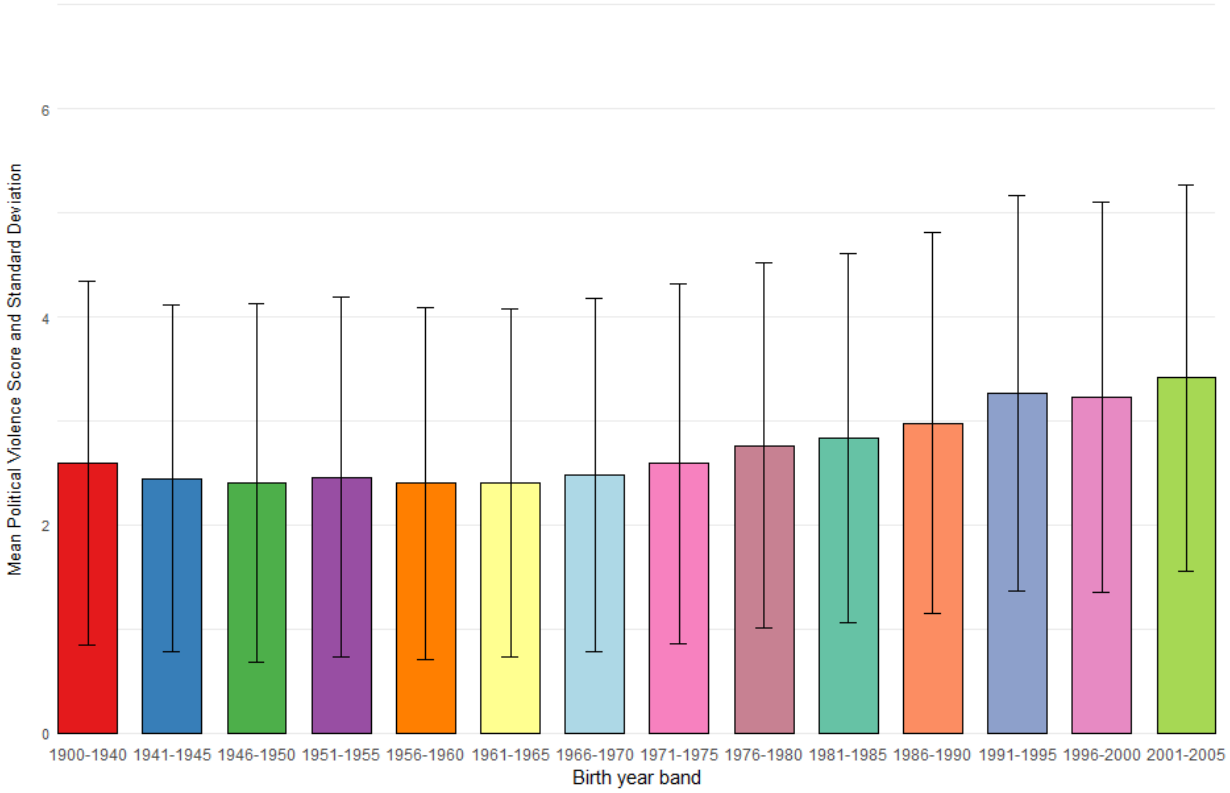
Note. Support for political violence scores range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree

Figure 2. *Mean support for political violence by ethnicity*



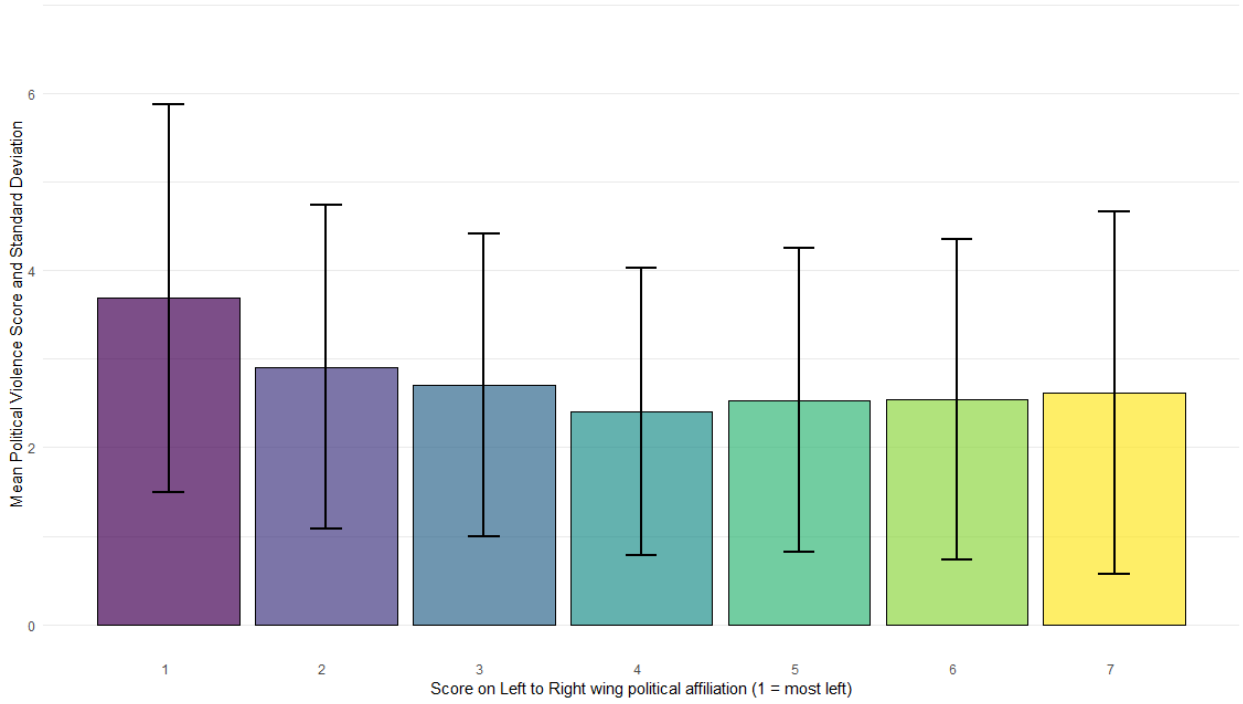
Note. Support for political violence scores range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree

Figure 3. *Mean support for political violence by age group*



Note. Support for political violence scores range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree

Figure 4. *Mean support for political violence by political orientation scores (left-right wing)*



Note. Support for political violence scores range from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree

Appendix 1. *Mini-IPIP6 Scale*

Extraversion

E01 Am the life of the party.

E02 Don't talk a lot. (r) .

E03 Keep in the background. (r)

E04 Talk to a lot of different people at parties.

Agreeableness

A01 Sympathize with others' feelings.

A02 Am not interested in other people's problems. (r)

A03 Feel others' emotions.

A04 Am not really interested in others. (r)

Conscientiousness

C01 Get chores done right away.

C02 Like order.

C03 Make a mess of things. (r)

C04 Often forget to put things back in their proper place. (r)

Neuroticism (low Emotional Stability)

N01 Have frequent mood swings.

N02 Am relaxed most of the time. (r)

N03 Get upset easily.

N04 Seldom feel blue. (r)

Openness to Experience

O01 Have a vivid imagination.

O02 Have difficulty understanding abstract ideas. (r)

O03 Do not have a good imagination. (r)

O04 Am not interested in abstract ideas. (r)

Honesty-Humility

H01 Feel entitled to more of everything. (r)

H02 Deserve more things in life. (r)

H03 Would like to be seen driving around in a very expensive car. (r)

H04 Would get a lot of pleasure from owning expensive luxury goods. (r)

Note. (r) denotes a reverse-coded item. See Sibley et al. (2011) for validation of the scale.

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