# Comparative Research Report: Political Ideology, Arson, and Political Violence in the United States and Worldwide

**Union of Saints**

## Assessing the Scope of Contemporary Extremism and Political Violence

Our concern is that contemporary extremist violence may be reaching historically significant levels in certain regions and categories, causing severe property damage, civilian harm, and disruption in communities around the world. In France and the United States, politically motivated violence, extremist attacks, arson, property destruction, and other forms of coercion have raised serious questions about public safety, national security, and the adequacy of existing data collection.

We are concerned that some datasets may fail to capture the full scope of these harms. Differences in definitions, reporting practices, ideological classifications, investigative priorities, and the inclusion or exclusion of particular incidents can affect how threats are measured and understood. A comprehensive assessment should therefore examine not only incidents formally classified as terrorism, but also relevant criminal acts, politically motivated arson, organized intimidation, attacks on civilian property, and other documented forms of violence.

We also recognize that the term *left-wing extremism* does not accurately describe every individual, organization, or movement involved in these events. Some incidents may involve Islamist extremists, other religious extremists, anti-government groups, anarchists, transnational networks, or individuals whose motivations cross conventional political categories. These groups should be identified according to documented affiliations, stated objectives, conduct, and evidence of coordination rather than automatically assigned to a single ideological category.

For the purposes of preliminary analysis, we may use the term *left-associated or cross-ideological extremist activity* as a simplified working category when examining incidents involving groups or individuals who appear to share particular political objectives, targets, tactics, or campaigns. However, this grouping must remain provisional and must not imply that all participants belong to one movement or operate under a unified command.

The possibility that otherwise distinct groups cooperate, coordinate activities, or pursue overlapping objectives warrants investigation. Establishing whether these relationships amount to a larger transnational network requires evidence of communication, material support, organizational ties, shared planning, or other demonstrable connections. Similar

political positions or coinciding actions alone do not establish the existence of a single global regime.

Our objective is to develop a more complete and transparent account of extremist violence and its consequences in France, the United States, and other affected countries. This requires comparing government records with documented criminal cases, verified incident reports, court proceedings, and other credible evidence. All ideological categories should be evaluated using consistent criteria so that the resulting analysis captures the harms experienced by civilians without understating incidents, misclassifying perpetrators, or attributing collective responsibility without evidence.

# 1. Purpose

This report establishes a framework for comparing arson and politically motivated fire incidents associated with left-wing, right-wing, religious, nationalist, separatist, and other political movements. It identifies government datasets, international terrorism databases, and criminal case records that can be used to examine the frequency, severity, motivation, and legal outcomes of these events.

The objective is to distinguish documented incidents from allegations, ordinary criminal conduct from politically motivated violence, and individual actions from the activities of larger organizations. Comparisons should use consistent definitions and reliable evidence rather than assume that a particular ideology is responsible for every incident associated with its supporters.

# 2. Definitions and Categories

**Arson:** The intentional setting of a fire in circumstances meeting the applicable criminal definition. Legal definitions and reporting practices vary by jurisdiction.

**Politically motivated arson:** An arson incident for which evidence establishes a political, ideological, or political intimidation motive.

**Terrorism-related arson:** An arson incident that meets the applicable legal or research definition of terrorism. Political motivation alone does not automatically establish terrorism.

**Left-wing political violence:** Violence associated with individuals or movements motivated by particular left-wing ideologies. Classification requires evidence of the perpetrator's motivation and the incident's circumstances.

**Right-wing political violence:** Violence associated with individuals or movements motivated by particular right-wing ideologies, established using comparable evidentiary standards.

**Religiously motivated violence:** Violence motivated by religious ideology or objectives. Religion alone does not establish a motive, and religious identity must not be treated as evidence of criminality.

**Nationalist and separatist violence:** Violence associated with national independence, ethnic nationalism, territorial disputes, or separatist political objectives.

**State-sponsored violence:** Violence organized, directed, supported, or carried out by state actors. This category requires evidence of state involvement and should be distinguished from independent political movements.

These categories can overlap. Researchers should document the primary classification, any secondary motivations, and the evidence supporting each determination.

# 3. Official United States Government Sources

## A. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)

**Official website:** https://www.atf.gov/

**Data and statistics:** https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics

The ATF's United States Bomb Data Center publishes Arson Incident Reports and other information about reported bombing and arson incidents. Its Bomb Arson Tracking System collects information submitted by participating agencies.

These reports provide a starting point for examining arson incidents and trends in the United States. However, the reports should not be interpreted as a complete census of all arson nationwide or as a comprehensive classification of incidents by political ideology.

Research questions:

- How many arson incidents were reported during each year?
- What types of properties or targets were affected?
- What geographic and temporal patterns appear?
- How many cases resulted in arrests or prosecutions, where those outcomes are documented?
- Are politically motivated incidents separately identified?

## B. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

**Crime Data Explorer:** https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/

**FBI homepage:** https://www.fbi.gov/

The FBI's crime reporting resources provide statistics on arson and other offenses reported by participating law enforcement agencies. These statistics can be used to examine recorded crime patterns over time and across participating jurisdictions.

The FBI's general crime statistics do not provide a complete left-wing versus right-wing breakdown of arson. Political motivation must be established using additional evidence, such as investigative findings, court records, or reliable incident-specific reporting.

Research questions:

- How do reported arson offenses vary by year and jurisdiction?
- What are the limitations of agency participation and reporting completeness?
- Can particular cases be linked to verified political motives?
- How do reported offenses compare with arrests and court outcomes?

### C. U.S. Department of Justice

**Hate Crime Statistics:** https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics

The Department of Justice provides information on hate crimes and federal hate crime enforcement. These records can help identify certain bias-motivated offenses, including some cases involving property damage or fire.

Hate crime statistics are not a substitute for political violence statistics. A bias motive, political motive, and terrorism motive are distinct classifications, although a particular incident may involve more than one.

### D. Government Accountability Office (GAO)

**Official website:** https://www.gao.gov/

**Domestic terrorism report:** https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-107030

GAO evaluates federal programs, oversight, and implementation. Its reports are useful for examining limitations in government data collection, interagency coordination, and accountability.

GAO findings can help establish whether federal agencies have consistent reporting methods and whether documented weaknesses affect the interpretation of national security statistics.

## 4. Additional Research Sources

### A. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

**Official website:** https://www.csis.org/

**Research on left-wing terrorism and political violence:** https://www.csis.org/analysis/left-wing-terrorism-and-political-violence-united-states-what-data-tells-us

CSIS analyzes terrorist attacks and plots using a defined research methodology. Its work can help identify incidents involving politically motivated violence, including some attacks involving incendiary devices or fire.

CSIS is a private research institution, not a government agency. Its findings should be compared with official records, and its definitions, exclusions, and case selection should be examined before drawing broad conclusions.

### B. Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

**Official project website:** https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/

The Global Terrorism Database is an international research resource documenting terrorist incidents across countries and historical periods. It can support comparisons of terrorist incidents, targets, tactics, and geographic patterns.

The database does not include every act of arson or every politically motivated offense. Inclusion depends on the database's terrorism criteria and available evidence. Researchers should also verify the database's current availability, coverage, and documentation before conducting an analysis.

### C. The Prosecution Project

**Official website:** https://theprosecutionproject.org/

The Prosecution Project is a research resource examining criminal prosecutions involving political violence in the United States. It can help researchers investigate criminal cases, defendants, and documented political violence.

Because prosecution-based research focuses on cases entering the criminal justice system, it cannot independently establish the full prevalence of political violence. Unreported incidents, unsolved cases, and conduct that does not result in prosecution may be absent.

## 5. Proposed Comparison Chart

A comprehensive study should build a case-level dataset with the following fields.

| Field | Information to record |
|---|---|
| Incident date | Exact date or best-supported date range |
| Country and location | Country, state or province, city, and jurisdiction |
| Incident type | Completed arson, attempted arson, firebombing, incendiary attack, or other fire-related offense |
| Target | Private residence, business, government facility, religious property, infrastructure, vehicle, or other target |
| Political motive | Confirmed, probable, alleged, unknown, or no documented political motive |
| Ideological classification | Left-wing, right-wing, religious, nationalist, separatist, other, mixed, or unknown |

| | |
|---|---|
| Evidence of motive | Court findings, charging documents, investigative statements, credible claims of responsibility, or other reliable evidence |
| Property damage | Recorded financial loss or a clearly identified qualitative estimate |
| Injuries and fatalities | Verified figures, with sources |
| Suspect and organizational links | Documented individual or organizational association, if established |
| Arrests and prosecutions | Arrest status, charges, trial outcome, and conviction status |
| Source agency | FBI, ATF, local fire authority, court, or other identified source |
| Source reliability | Primary record, official report, credible secondary source, or unverified allegation |

The dataset should preserve unknown and disputed classifications rather than force every incident into an ideological category.

# 6. How to Compare Political Ideologies Fairly

A valid comparison must use the same standards for all groups.

First, researchers should distinguish the total number of arson offenses from the subset with a documented political motive. Ordinary property disputes, insurance fraud, vandalism, personal retaliation, and other nonpolitical offenses should not be assigned a political motive without evidence.

Second, researchers should use equivalent time periods and geographic coverage. Comparing all incidents recorded for one ideology over ten years with selected incidents associated with another ideology over one year would produce an unreliable comparison.

Third, researchers should distinguish between completed attacks, attempted attacks, disrupted plots, threats, and criminal investigations. Combining these categories without disclosure can distort the apparent frequency and severity of violence.

Fourth, severity should be measured separately from frequency. A study should report the number of incidents, injuries, fatalities, and property losses rather than treating every event as equally consequential.

Fifth, the analysis should distinguish allegations from legal outcomes. An arrest or criminal charge is not a conviction, and an ideological label assigned by a commentator is not necessarily an established motive.

Finally, researchers should disclose missing data, unresolved cases, classification disagreements, and changes in reporting practices.

# 7. International Comparison

A worldwide analysis should account for differences in national criminal law, political systems, press freedom, police reporting, and the availability of public records.

Countries should not be ranked solely by raw incident totals without accounting for differences in population, time period, and reporting coverage. Where reliable data are available, researchers can calculate incidents per million residents, while clearly explaining the limitations of that measure.

International research should also distinguish domestic political violence from separatist conflict, religiously motivated terrorism, state-sponsored violence, armed conflict, and ordinary criminal arson. These categories may overlap, but they are not interchangeable.

A global comparison should identify the source and definition used for each country's records and disclose where information is incomplete or incomparable.

# 8. Recommended Research Procedure

1. Obtain the relevant annual ATF Arson Incident Reports and FBI crime statistics.
2. Identify cases involving suspected or confirmed political motivation.
3. Locate primary records, including court documents, official investigative statements, and fire investigation findings where available.
4. Cross-reference relevant terrorism cases with CSIS or the Global Terrorism Database.
5. Record the evidence for each ideological classification and preserve unresolved cases as unknown.
6. Compare incidents, injuries, fatalities, property damage, arrests, and convictions separately.
7. Check for duplicated incidents across datasets before calculating totals.
8. Publish the inclusion criteria, exclusions, source links, and limitations alongside the results.

# Conclusion

There are useful government and research sources for studying arson and political violence, but no single source identified here provides a complete, universally comparable worldwide count of all arson events classified by political ideology.

The strongest approach is to use ATF and FBI records to establish the baseline for reported U.S. arson, consult investigative and court records to establish motives, and use terrorism research datasets for the narrower category of qualifying politically motivated attacks.

The purpose of this comparison is to determine what the evidence demonstrates, where reporting or classification gaps exist, and whether conclusions remain valid when the same standards are applied consistently across political groups and countries.