

# THE BOOGALOO BALLAD OF HENRY GRAVES



## MAINTAINING A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY FINAL REPORT

Bertelsmann  
FOUNDATION



POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM  
RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB  
CENTER *for* UNIVERSITY EXCELLENCE



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# SUMMARY

This study examined public attitudes on authority related to COVID-19 restrictions and anti-government violence. Participants answered survey questions about their feelings toward establishment sources of authority such as government and media, as well as anti-establishment voices including anti-government armed groups and alternative media. This study tests whether a short film intended to counter violent extremism and misinformation related to anti-government violence has an impact on viewer attitudes and trust in sources of information. The results indicate that a surprisingly large percentage of people identify with the violent anti-government Boogaloo movement or know someone who does. For those individuals, watching the video had only a minor impact on their attitudes. However, for the vast majority of viewers who were not familiar with Boogaloo or who have merely heard of this movement, watching the film caused a significant reduction in anti-establishment views, and a greater likelihood of examining news sources critically and trusting reputable sources of information.

The study involved 512 American adults and was conducted between November 6 and December 20, 2020, during the period between the US presidential election and the attack on the US Capitol. Participants first completed an online survey measuring their views on policy issues related to government authority, peaceful and armed protests, consumption habits for news media and social media, and COVID-19 public safety restrictions. They then watched the animated short film *The Boogaloo Ballad of Henry Graves*. Finally, they answered the same questions again to determine whether the film had any impact on their views.

We found that approximately 15% of our sample either reported that acquaintances or they themselves were part of the Boogaloo movement, and their attitudes did not shift after viewing a film illustrating the dangers of the movement. However the film was effective in shaping the views of subjects who were not at all familiar with Boogaloo, or had heard of it but were not involved or knew someone involved in it. The findings also indicated a relationship between not trusting most government, media, or scientific authority, supporting alternative online news sources, and supporting armed anti-government movements. The vast majority of the public does not share these views (Saad, 2020; Saad, 2021), and information about the risks of anti-government violence can help to inoculate the public against both support for extremism and consumption and spread of misinformation (Braddock, 2019; McGuire, 1961a; McGuire, 1961b).

# STUDY DESIGN

The study had two goals. The first was identifying links between anti-government extremism and opposition to public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. In early summer 2020, when the study was designed, there were an increasing number of armed protests against COVID mask and quarantine restrictions at state capitals around the United States, followed by violent plots against governors, mayors, and other public officials. Much of this was linked to online misinformation about public policy and a coordinated disinformation effort by fringe extremist groups. Establishing whether there was a link between anti-government extremism and opposition to COVID-19 public health measures offered the possibility of determining whether changing minds about one would also change minds about the other.

In particular, we wanted to study attitudes about the, “Boogaloo” - a loosely-organized movement (Lewis, 2020) of anti-government extremists who were present at many of these rallies (Farivar, 2020). Members of the movement state that they are working to foment a second American civil war resulting in the overthrow of the United States government, and they often self-identify at protests by wearing Hawaiian shirts (signifying the “big luau” as a word play on Boogaloo). Boogaloo does not have a fixed ideology and, while it is more closely identified with right-wing anti-government extremists, some members have left-wing views (Coaston, 2020). In 2020, Boogaloo supporters had been involved in multiple violent acts resulting in the deaths of law enforcement officers and other crimes (Beckett, 2021; Winton, Dolan, & Chabria, 2020). We therefore included questions to measure public awareness of and attitudes toward the Boogaloo movement.

The second goal was to test whether information about anti-government extremism would change minds about an extremist movement, and also about anti-COVID 19 restrictions or other associated issues, such as support for political violence. We therefore measured participant attitudes in a pre-test survey, provided them with information in the form of a short film with a fictional depiction of one man’s entry into the Boogaloo movement - in part due to misinformation about COVID-19 safety measures - and administered the same survey after watching the video in order to see whether the information delivered in the film shifted attitudes about anti-government extremists, public health, and trust in different sources of information. The 11-minute animated film, *The Boogaloo Ballad of Henry Graves*, was produced by the Bertelsmann Foundation with input from PERIL as part of an educational series about issues confronting American civic democracy.



The survey firm Qualtrics recruited participants for a sample of American adults and administered the survey. Respondents agreed to participate online and be compensated for their participation, but they did not know what this particular study was about in advance. The final 512 responses were all from participants who completed the initial survey, watched the entire film, and completed the follow-up survey as well.

Participant views about public policy issues and how much they supported or opposed groups like Boogaloo or the police were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Respondents were given the option to express their views with seven options: strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neutral, slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree. Each response was assigned a corresponding point value between 1-7, and results were coded as ordinal variable data. We analyzed shifts on the scale to measure how much change in support, if any, the film had on public attitudes.

# IDENTIFYING THE BOOGALOO – AND IDENTIFYING WITH IT

As expected, regardless of their demographic characteristics such as race, age, or political affiliation, most of our sample supported participation in the political system and peaceful protests, and rejected the idea that the Federal government is more concerned with taking away their rights than protecting them or that armed protests are necessary.

However, a surprisingly large percentage stated they are familiar with the fringe Boogaloo movement, or that they or their acquaintances are part of it. It is possible that some of them did not understand what Boogaloo was when they answered that section of the survey.

**Table 1** 

*Survey responses to Boogaloo-related questions collected 11/2020 - 12/2020 (n = 512)*

<b>Boogaloo-related questions</b>	<b>Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Yes - "I have heard of the Boogaloo movement"	139	27.3
Yes - "I know people who associate with the Boogaloo movement"	42	8.2
Yes - "I associate with the Boogaloo movement."	34	6.6

Men were slightly likelier than women to report knowing about, being associated with, or having heard of the Boogaloo movement. The major difference between sexes was in having heard of the Boogaloo. Of men who report knowing someone involved with Boogaloo, 72% of them say they are active in the movement themselves, whereas only half of the women who reported knowing someone in the movement described themselves as associating with it.

The finding that approximately eight percent of our sample knew people involved in Boogaloo and nearly as many describe themselves as associated with it is consistent with different polls taken immediately after the attack on the US Capitol. These other studies found that approximately eight percent of American adults supported the attack or believed that the perpetrators “represent people like me.” (Marist Poll, 2021; YouGov, 2021). Surprisingly, our study found that more subjects who identified as part of the Boogaloo movement were Democrats ( n = 20) than Republicans ( n = 12).



**Table 2** 

*Demographics of those who say, "I associate with the Boogaloo movement." (n = 34)*

<b>"I associate with the Boogaloo movement" - Yes</b>	<b>Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percentage of Yes Group (%)</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	27	79.4
Female	7	20.6
<b>Race-Ethnicity</b>		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0
Asian	0	0
Black or African American	7	20.6
Hispanic or Latino	2	5.9
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
White	25	73.5
Other	0	0
<b>Political party affiliation</b>		
Democratic party	20	58.8
Green party	1	2.9
Independent party	1	2.9
Libertarian party	0	0
Republican party	12	35.3
Not registered with any party	0	0
Other	0	0

# ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT

We describe Boogaloo as an extremist movement, however there are no universal criteria for what constitutes extremism. One definition used by researchers is JM Berger's (2021) standard of the belief that violence will always be required to protect members of a group from those who are outside of it. While one goal of this study was to measure public support for a particular extremist group, we did not measure whether participants believe violence is necessary generally or under particular conditions. We therefore did not attempt to measure whether study participants were extremists or to define extremism using the survey instrument.

Instead, we did note a correlation between individuals who expressed skepticism or resistance to government authority as well as a distrust of mainstream media as a source of information. We termed this orientation as "anti-establishment." As compared to other study participants, anti-establishment participants indicated high levels of support for four statements related to political violence:

**Table 3** 

*Breakdown of anti-establishment items before watching video on 7-point Likert scale (n = 512)*

Anti-establishment Items	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard Deviation (SD)	Percentage Agree or Strongly Agree (%)
"The U.S. Federal government is taking away the rights of citizens."	4.36	1.82	29.3
"American citizens need to take matters into their own hands to protect democracy."	4.43	1.89	33.2
"The U.S. government is using COVID-19 shelter in place orders to infringe on American rights and freedoms."	3.45	2.09	20.8
"The Boogaloo movement is protecting the rights of Americans."	3.63	1.92	12.4

Participants who had higher anti-establishment scores tended to trust informal or alternative media (personal contacts, alternative news, social media, and online forums/websites) more for sources of news information than established sources such as newspapers or fact-checking websites.

**Table 4** 

*Correlation between pre-test anti-establishment thinking and trust in news sources (n = 512)*

News Source	Frequency (N)	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Alternative News (e.g. InfoWars, Signs of the Times, The Corbett Report)	295	.503	< .000
Internet forums & Messaging apps	298	.511	< .000
Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube)	305	.481	< .000
US Federal Government	307	.211	< .000
Personal Contacts	307	.163	.004

Notably, however, participants with higher anti-establishment scores both trusted the Federal government as a source of information and reported that it was doing a good job managing COVID-19. We attribute this finding to support for the Trump Administration that was in office at the time rather than support for the Federal government. These same participants did not express high levels of trust in either state or local government as reliable sources of information or express confidence in their management of COVID-19.

Prior to watching the video, there were small differences between Democrats and Republicans in terms of anti-establishment ideology – with Democrats being slightly lower than Republicans – as well as small differences between gun owners and non-gun owners – with gun owners being slightly higher in anti-establishment thinking prior to watching the video; however, neither of these differences were statistically significant. We did find statistically significantly higher levels of anti-establishment views among military veterans compared to non-veterans.

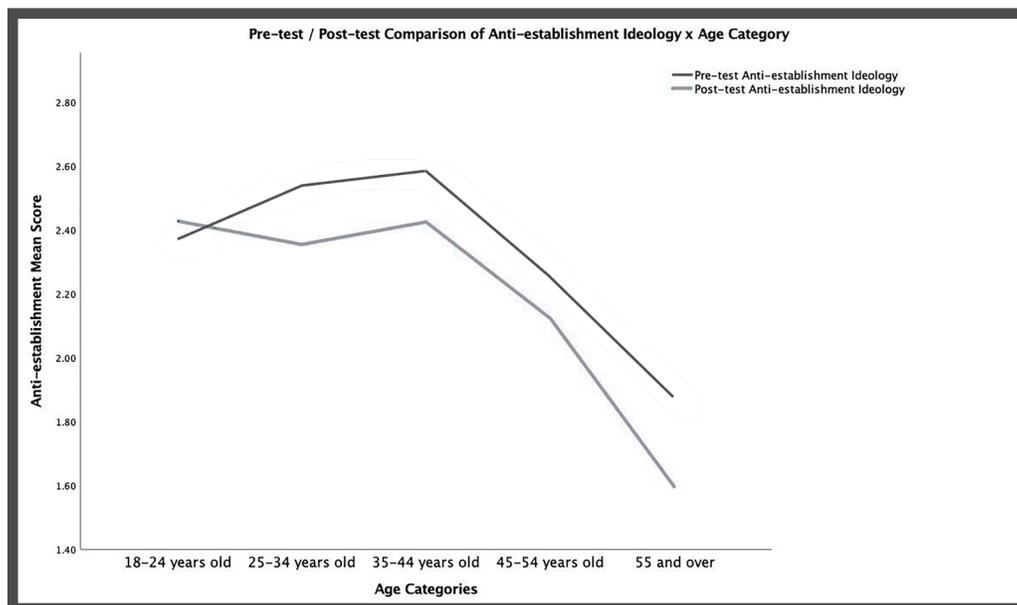


# THE IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION ON ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT VIEWS

After completing the survey, participants next watched *The Boogaloo Ballad of Henry Graves* online. The narrator of the film does not directly condemn the Boogaloo movement or express a preference about any of the issues, such as armed protests or COVID-19 restrictions. However, the film clearly depicts a man joining an extremist group after consuming online misinformation, negative consequences including violence as a result of joining an extremist group, and the main character discovering through fact-checking research that he was misinformed and leaves the group. They then took the same survey again to measure any effect on their feelings toward establishment and anti-establishment thinking, sources of information, and authority.

Figure 1 

Comparison of anti-establishment thinking by age before and after watching the video (n = 512)



Viewing the film had a clear impact on viewers in the post-test survey. Aggregate anti-establishment scores dropped significantly:

**Table 6** 

*Comparison of anti-establishment thinking before and after watching the animated video for everyone, as well as by sex and veteran status (n = 512)*

Demographics	Anti-establishment Pre-test / Post-test Mean Difference ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard Deviation (SD)	t	p
Overall	.18	.56	5.60	< .000
Men	.16	.56	3.84	< .000
Women	.22	.55	4.21	< .000
Democrats	.18	.56	3.66	< .000
Republicans	.06	.59	.969	.335
Veteran - Yes	.15	.52	1.87	.068
Gun Owner - Yes	.27	.61	4.07	< .000
High School Diploma	.18	.52	3.59	.001
Bachelor's Degree	.16	.58	2.84	.006
Master's Degree	.19	.51	2.91	.005
Doctorate Degree	.08	.74	.435	.670

Military veteran status does not appear to correlate with changes in support, but other demographic characteristics did. While both men and women saw a reduction in anti-establishment views after having watched the video, the difference was more significant among women. Additionally, those with high school diplomas, Bachelor's degrees, and Master's degrees all saw significant reductions in anti-establishment thinking after watching the video; those with doctorates saw a small but nonsignificant reduction in anti-establishment thinking, and with only 2 subjects reporting less than a high school diploma, it was not possible to determine the effect of the video on that group.

There was also a notable partisan difference in the reduction of anti-establishment views between Democrats and Republicans. While there was a significant decline in anti-establishment feelings among Democrats after watching the film, the same effect did not occur among Republicans (see Table 6)

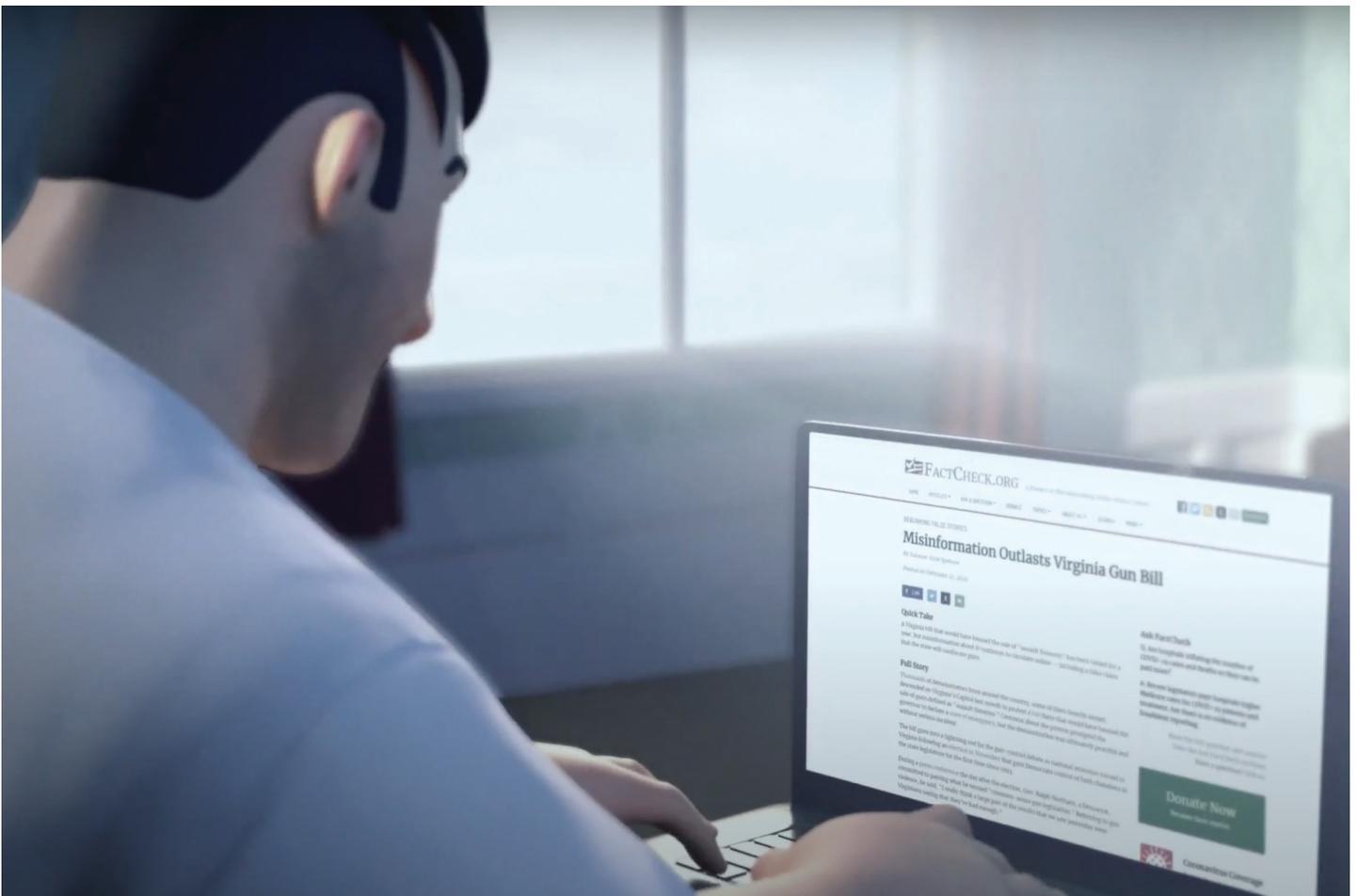
The film also shifted feelings about government and trusted sources of information (see Table 7). There was a significant reduction in support for the beliefs that “Americans need to take matters into their own hands to protect democracy” and that “there are too many restrictions on Second Amendment rights” after watching the film. In the post-test survey participants indicated significantly more positive feelings toward the US Federal government, and significant reductions in the belief that “the US government is taking away the rights of citizens.”

**Table 7** 

*Comparison of before and after watching the animated video on statements related to the government and the second amendment (n = 512)*

Statements	Pre-test / Post-test Mean Difference ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard Deviation (SD)	t	p
“American citizens need to take matters into their own hands to protect democracy.”	.543	1.56	7.71	< .000
“There are too many restrictions on Second Amendment rights.”	.221	1.46	3.33	.001
“How would you rate your feelings about the US Federal government?”	-.306	1.15	-2.63	.010
“The US Federal government is taking away the rights of citizens.”	.412	1.58	5.79	< .000
“The US Federal government has done a good job responding to COVID-19.”	-.10	1.03	-2.11	.036

The film narrator mentioned anger over the economic impact of COVID-19 quarantine restrictions and anti-mask sentiments. Although the film did not weigh in on the efficacy of these public health measures, reducing positive feelings for critics of these policies seems to have led to some additional support for the policies. Overall post-test responses indicated a slightly increased belief that “the US Federal government has done a good job responding to COVID-19,” after watching the film.



# THE IMPACT ON TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Watching the film and its portrayal of the negative consequences of internet misinformation produced significant shifts among participants in which sources of information they trust for reliable news. Participants reported reduced trust in news from personal contacts, alternative news sources, social media, internet forums and messaging apps. They were also significantly less likely to trust news stories shared with them by acquaintances. By contrast, the film significantly increased trust in news provided by fact-checking websites, and participants reported a greater importance in personally fact-checking both media and peer-shared news stories.

**Table 8** 

*Comparison of trust in various news sources before and after watching the video (n = 512)*

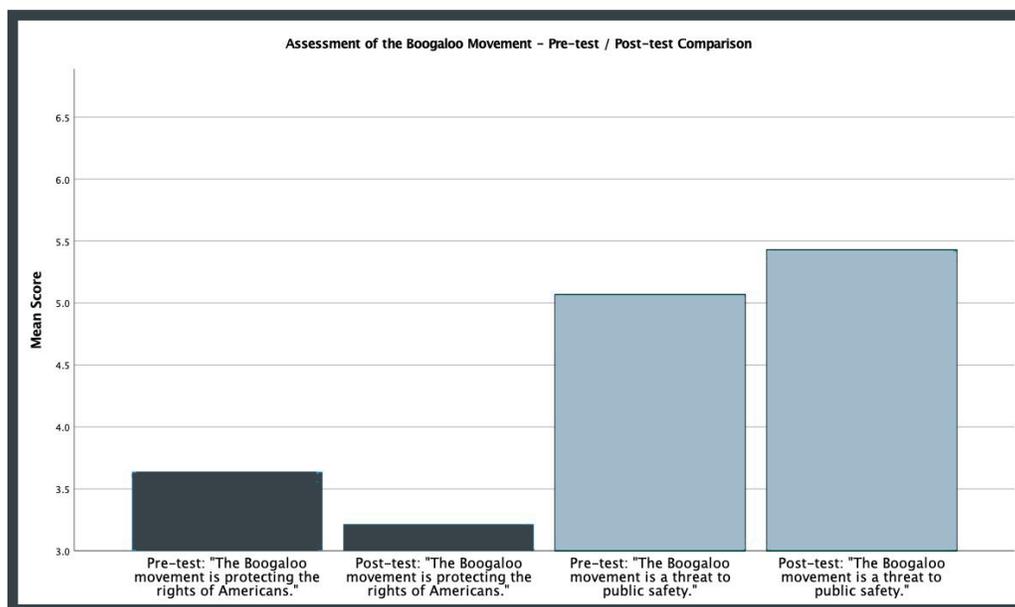
<b>News Source</b>	<b>Pre-test / Post-test Mean Difference (<math>\bar{x}</math>)</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (SD)</b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Personal Contacts	.313	1.28	5.50	< .000
Alternative news	.144	1.34	2.31	.021
Social media	.235	1.23	4.26	< .000
Internet Forums & Messaging Apps	.260	1.25	4.48	< .000
US Federal Government	.04	1.25	.713	.476
State Government	.024	1.25	.427	.669
Local Government	-.061	1.22	-1.13	.258
National Newspapers	.020	1.13	.396	.692
Local Newspapers	.091	1.11	1.83	.069
Television	.078	1.14	1.52	.128
National Radio	.103	1.14	1.95	.052
Fact-checking Websites	-.281	1.41	-4.36	< .000

# DIM VIEW OF BOOGALOO

The biggest effect of viewing the film was to make most participants feel less positively toward the Boogaloo movement, both in terms of protecting the rights of Americans and of being a threat to public safety (see Figure 2). But while it was true that more than 72 percent of participants had never heard of Boogaloo before this study, those who knew someone in the movement did not see a meaningful change in anti-establishment thinking after having watched the video

Figure 2 

Comparison of beliefs about the Boogaloo movement before and after watching the animated video (n = 512)



**Table 9** 

Responses to Boogaloo Movement items (n = 512)

Respondents who watched The Boogaloo Ballad of Henry Graves	“The Boogaloo Movement is protecting the rights of Americans”	“The Boogaloo Movement is a threat to public safety”
All Respondents	512	512
Changed opinion after viewing video	140 (27.3%)	166 (32.4%)
Likert scale shift among those who changed their feelings about Boogaloo	Endorsed statement less: (n = 99, 19.3%)	Endorsed statement less: (n = 54, 10.5%)
	Endorsed statement more: (n = 41, 8%)	Endorsed statement more: (n = 112, 21.9%)
	Mean shift: 3.63 → 2.78	Mean shift: 5.07 → 5.51
	Median shift: 2 points, 4 → 2	Median shift: 1 point, 5 → 6

**Figure 3** 

Pre-test breakdown of responses to, “The Boogaloo movement is protecting the rights of Americans.” (n = 512)

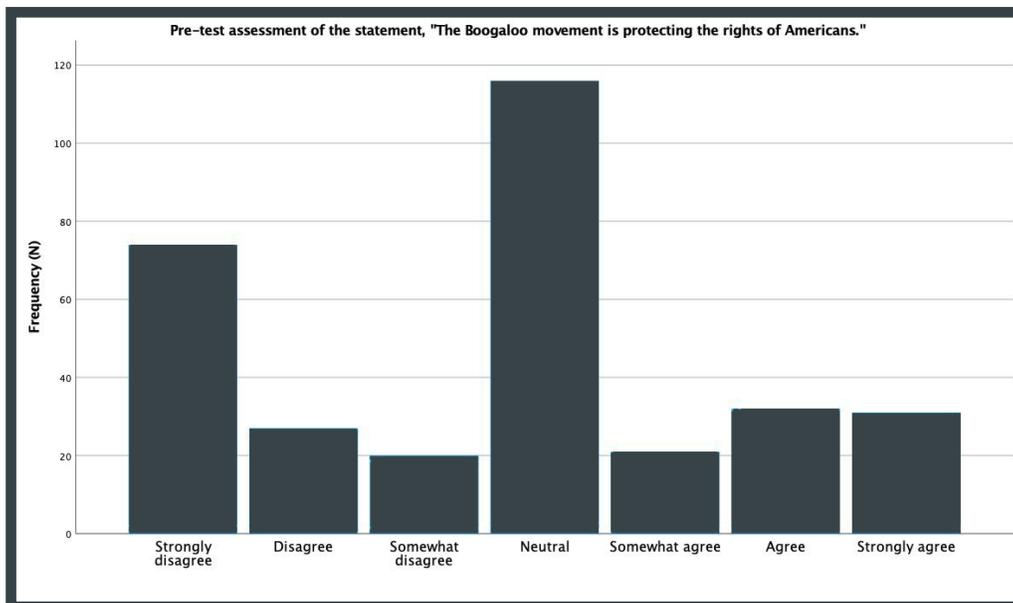


Figure 4 

Pre-test breakdown of response to, "The Boogaloo movement is a threat to public safety." (n = 512)

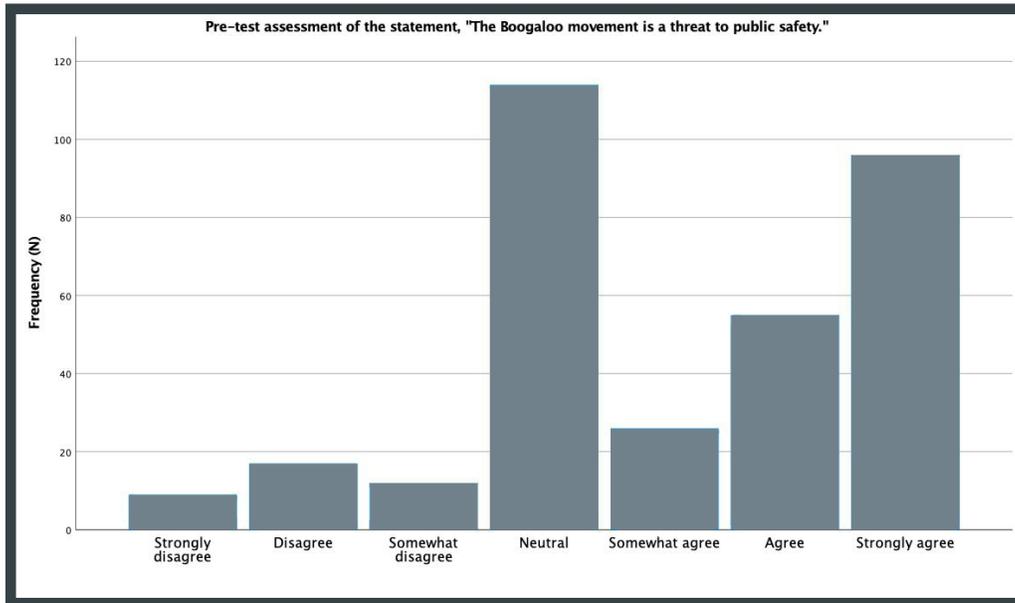


Figure 5 

Post-test breakdown of responses to, "The Boogaloo movement is protecting the rights of Americans." (n = 512)

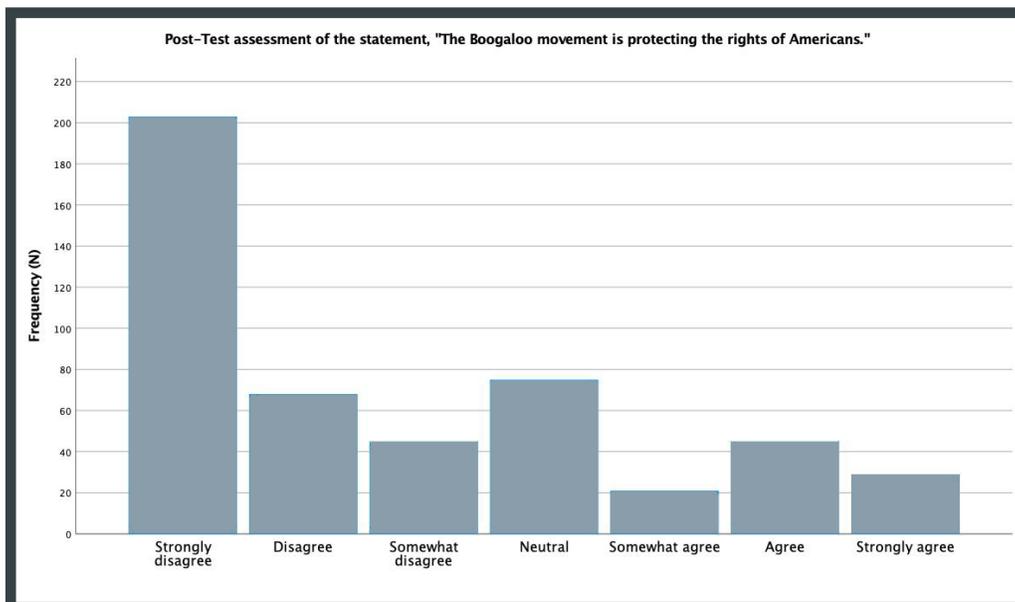
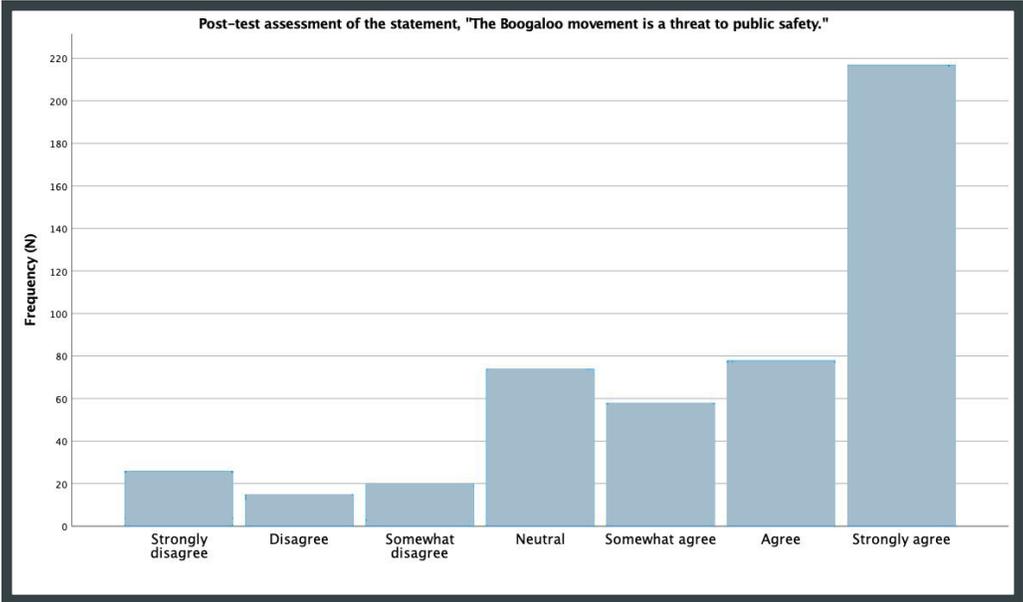


Figure 6



Post-test breakdown of response to, "The Boogaloo movement is a threat to public safety." (n = 512)



It is critical to note that reactions varied by whether or not participants claimed prior connections with Boogaloo. People who had never heard of the Boogaloo movement, reported a significant decrease in anti-establishment views after watching the video.

**Table 10** 

*Assessment of the video's effectiveness in changing anti-establishment beliefs before and after watching the video depending on level of contact with the Boogaloo movement (n = 512)*

Contact with Boogaloo	Pre-test / Post-test Mean Difference ( $\bar{x}$ )	Standard Deviation (SD)	t	p
"I associate with the Boogaloo movement."	-.01	.64	-.120	.905
"I know people who associate with the Boogaloo movement."	.06	.68	.576	.568
"I have heard of the Boogaloo movement." - Yes	.12	.47	2.90	.004
"I have heard of the Boogaloo movement." - No	.22	.61	4.63	< .000

The results were considerably different among those who said they know people who associate with the Boogaloo movement ( $m = 3.04$ ) and those who did not know people who associate with the Boogaloo movement ( $m = 2.23$ ). For people who said they have heard of the Boogaloo Movement, there was a small, but statistically significant decrease in anti-establishment feelings. However, it is important to note that there were low levels of support for anti-establishment views in the pre-test among those who were only familiar with Boogaloo rather than being in it or having an acquaintance who is, indicating that "familiar" meant that some of them already had negative views of Boogaloo before the study (see Table 9).

And among the 34 individuals who said that they themselves associate with the Boogaloo movement there was actually held slightly higher levels of anti-establishment after watching the film despite the negative portrayal of Boogaloo. Either these participants approved of Boogaloo despite the film narrative that turned other participants against it, or the negative portrayal produced a backlash that prompted them to report more positive feelings about it in resistance.

# MAINTAINING A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY

Our findings in this study carry important implications for efforts to counter violent extremism:

- Unless participants were already favorably disposed toward Boogaloo or people in it, watching *The Boogaloo Ballad of Henry Graves* caused them to feel significantly less positively toward Boogaloo and lowered anti-establishment views more generally.
- Support for Boogaloo, and presumably other extremist groups, is “soft,” based largely on non-familiarity and possibly on misinformation. Providing accurate information can reduce support among those who are already familiar with extremist groups.
- Viewing the film also encouraged participants to turn to fact-checked reliable sources of news and to give less credence to disinformation. This indicates that an inoculation treatment – exposing the public to information about extremism – is effective in reducing support for extremism.
- Those who held anti-establishment views in the pre-test survey reported that they trusted online sources for information and personal contacts. This finding suggests that online disinformation is driving support for extremism and that efforts to counter extremism must address and incorporate online sources of information.

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