

## **ABSTRACT**

### **ESSAYS ON THE DRIVERS OF POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM**

Meysam Alizadeh, Ph.D.

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Claudio Cioffi-Revilla

The problem of interest in this dissertation is the phenomenon of drifting toward opinion extremes. The process is called *Radicalization* and has received a great deal of attention in social psychology and sociology from its inception. Although it is extremism of behavior that is of greatest interest, it is important to study opinion extremism since it has been shown to be a plausible preceding step of violent extremism. One of the longstanding quests in counter-radicalization studies is to know what drives extremists to adopt extreme ideologies. However, it is unlikely that extremists will volunteer for experimental studies.

Existing research on extremism were conducted on either social science students or questionnaires/interviews of random individuals. Also the sample size in all these cases varies between few hundreds to few thousands. Therefore, there is a need to use more innovative methods to obtain reliable data about extremists at both individual and regional levels.

In this dissertation, I use agent-based models of opinion dynamics, data from online social media, such as Twitter, publicly available datasets, and crowdsourcing to study various drivers of the political and ideological extremism including intergroup relations, psychological functioning, personality traits, and socio-economic factors. In particular, I introduce a novel dataset, based on the data from Twitter, for studying the psychological and personality profile of domestic ideological extremists in the US. This data provides a promising means of obtaining actionable system-scale insights from digital user-generated content.

The results reveals that intergroup conflict and in-group favoritism increases and decreases the number of emergent extremists in the population. I also showed the qualitative and quantitative differences between different activation regimes in agent-based opinion dynamics models. In particular, I found that exposing extremists to more social interactions reduces the overall number of extremists in the society. Finally, empirical results from analysis of American National Election Study and social media data emphasizes the role of socio-economic indicators and psychological states in political and ideological extremism respectively. Together, these findings produce a new lens to explore various drivers of opinion extremism.