

ISD

Powering solutions  
to extremism, hate  
and disinformation

THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM

ANTI-LOCKDOWN

ACTIVITY: UNITED STATES

COUNTRY PROFILE

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## INTRODUCTION

For the US, 2020-21 was one of the most politically charged and socially divisive periods in the country's recent memory. Numerous issues like the response to COVID-19, the killing of George Floyd and subsequent racial justice protests, the pre- and post-election periods, and the vaccine rollout, have all served to further polarise the nation. The US faced significant division before 2020, yet the pandemic will likely be remembered as a period that served to accelerate polarisation across the nation.

Restrictions introduced nationwide in March 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19 fostered immediate backlash and gave rise to an anti-mask, anti-lockdown protest movement that provided an opportunity for extremists to campaign, mobilise offline, and potentially reach new sections of the public. Anti-lockdown protest groups in numerous states created what became an informal nationwide movement. Monitoring from ISD picked up Telegram channels with tens of thousands of followers, mostly within the US, who urged people to take up arms to protest the lockdowns and protect their civil liberties,<sup>1</sup> while COVID-19 was used to advance calls for the 'boogaloo', an extremist anti-government meme referring to an impending civil war.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, individuals within right-wing extremist groups framed COVID-19 as an opportunity to enact violence.

As 2020 progressed, conspiracies related to the origins of COVID-19, perceived infringements of civil liberties and alternative treatments took centre stage. At the same time, an emboldened QAnon conspiracy community sought to hijack and inject conspiracy theories into the mainstream discussions about protecting children.<sup>3</sup> Right-wing extremist groups and militias also activated themselves in opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, often appearing on the streets of different US cities carrying firearms, which resulted in shootings in Wisconsin and Oregon.<sup>4</sup>

As November 2020 neared, President Trump and his supporters pushed baseless claims and conspiracies that voter fraud was a real threat to the electoral integrity of the US. The mix of disinformation and conspiracy narratives produced and promoted by content creators, right-wing media outlets and pro-Trump supporters was seized upon by extremists, culminating in the violent events of 6 January 2021 in DC, as reported in ISD's Long Road to the Capitol series.<sup>5</sup>

2021 saw the beginning of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout campaign in the US and with it a refocusing of anti-government efforts against federal mandates around vaccinations, the requirement for masks in schools, and possible introduction of vaccine passports. Extremism fuelled by anti-vaccine and anti-mask mandate attitudes became a growing threat throughout the year. Members of far-right groups like the Proud Boys joined mask and vaccine mandate protests;<sup>6</sup> numerous teachers across the country were assaulted or hospitalised for seeking to enforce mask mandates in the classroom;<sup>7</sup> and police officers were required to be stationed outside schools and attend school board meetings to ensure protests and anti-vaccine or anti-mask activities did not lead to violence.<sup>8</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES INVOLVED

The COVID-19 protest movement incorporates a diverse range of groups and communities. There are formal organisations, such as America's Frontline Doctors, who have fostered support for their promotion of alternative treatments to COVID-19 and anti-vaccine sentiments.<sup>9</sup> COVID-19 restrictions gave rise to an anti-lockdown movement that saw demonstrations and protest groups form in many states, and these also provided a space for extremist groups like militias, and the Proud Boys. Movements inspired by wide-ranging conspiracy theories, such as the QAnon community, also capitalised on the COVID-19 protest movement, specifically related to opposition to vaccines. Importantly, many of the communities and individuals involved in protests and activism around COVID-19 also capitalised on other drivers of unrest throughout the US, including opposition to racial justice protests and conspiracy theories related to the result of the 2020 presidential election, leading to the January 6th insurrection.

### America's Frontline Doctors

One of the earliest formal groups to gain national prominence over its opposition to COVID-19 measures was America's Frontline Doctors (AFD),<sup>10</sup> a conservative political organisation affiliated with the Tea Party Patriots group, and led by Simone Gold. Gold was later arrested and indicted for participating in the 6 January attack on the Capitol in Washington DC<sup>11</sup> and eventually reached an agreement to plead guilty to charges connected to the riot.<sup>12</sup> AFD made headlines in July 2020 when the group appeared in a video promoting the supposed benefits of the drug hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19. The video was removed by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for violating their community guidelines on misinformation, but not before it generated millions of views and was shared widely online, including by President Trump and right-wing media outlets like Breitbart.<sup>13</sup>

The event and subsequent fallout from the video served as a launchpad for AFD, who progressed to spreading further disinformation about COVID-19. In 2021 the group pivoted towards more explicit anti-vaccine activities, arguing against the introduction of vaccine mandates or use of "experimental vaccines"<sup>14</sup>. Whilst campaigning against vaccines, which they also term as "experimental biological agents", it's reported that AFD and a network of associated health care providers earned up to \$6.7 million promoting ineffective and unproven treatments via a telehealth consultation initiative.<sup>15</sup>

### Anti-lockdown protest movement

Since the beginning of the outbreak, protests against lockdowns and other measures aimed to curb the spread of COVID-19 have been common across the US. Beginning in April 2020, protests against lockdowns that called for the reopening of businesses sprung up in multiple cities and states. One of the earliest states to witness anti-lockdown protests was Michigan, where protest groups rallied against Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The protesters portrayed themselves as speaking for the people, though multiple news organisations including Reuters<sup>16</sup> and the Guardian<sup>17</sup> showed that the demonstrations were organised by Republican Party and Trump campaign and re-election groups. A pattern of similar networks linking protests to right-wing and pro-Trump organisations was observed in other states that had active anti-lockdown movements such as Idaho and Washington.

The anti-lockdown movement is best described as localised, state-level opposition; these rallies offered citizens and more extreme groups the opportunity to protest outside state Capitols with firearms and accompanying military gear. The President chose not to speak out against these movements and instead used his Twitter account to encourage protesters to "LIBERATE" Minnesota, Michigan and Virginia, a move that was widely interpreted as a call-to-arms for radical groups and right-wing extremist communities to mobilise against state-level COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>18</sup>

## Militias

The anti-lockdown movement allowed other extremist groups like militias to capitalise on the pandemic to oppose restrictions, promote themselves, and mobilise on- and offline.

In October 2020, the FBI announced charges against Wolverine Watchmen, a Michigan militia accused of plotting to kidnap and kill Governor Whitmer<sup>19</sup> Using a private Facebook group and two encrypted chat apps to organise and plan, the group intended to storm the state Capitol, take hostages and charge the governor with treason. They had met and mobilised previously in June 2020, at anti-lockdown, pro-Second Amendment rallies in the state. In Idaho, Ammon Bundy - a local militia leader<sup>20</sup> turned political candidate<sup>21</sup> who led the occupation of the Malheur national wildlife refuge in 2016<sup>22</sup> - had spoken at numerous anti-lockdown events in the state.<sup>23</sup> Militia members were also present at rallies in Texas, Illinois and Pennsylvania.<sup>24</sup>

## Proud Boys

The far-right Proud Boys group was active in anti-lockdown, anti-mask and anti-vaccine demonstrations in 2020 and 2021. Throughout August 2021, members of the Proud Boys attended protests against COVID-19 restrictions in California, Oregon, Ohio, South Carolina and Kentucky.<sup>25</sup> The group's activity in Florida highlighted how the Proud Boys, like other far-right groups, have collaborated with COVID-19 protest groups to oppose restrictions designed to curb the spread of the virus. In July 2021, Enrique Tarrio, then chairman of the Proud Boys, reportedly attended a protest outside Miami Dade County School Board to speak against mask mandates, vaccine requirements, and "critical race theory".<sup>26</sup>

In September 2021, members of the group tried to enter a number of high schools in Washington State to protest against school mask mandates.<sup>27</sup> Members of the North Carolina local chapter of the group also attended meetings by public health officials in November to use their presence to encourage officials to drop mask mandates.<sup>28</sup> Across the nation, the Proud Boys focused their efforts on protesting against mask mandates as a way of mobilising against federal and state governments.

Proud Boys and armed groups were also active in counter protests against Black Lives Matter protesters that erupted after the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Proud Boys frequently clashed with left-wing groups and decentralised networks of antifascist groups in various US cities throughout the summer, while armed groups served as extrajudicial security services in cities that saw looting or violence linked to the protests. In Portland, Oregon, there were regular clashes between Proud Boys and left-wing protesters.

## QAnon

QAnon is a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that claims that an elite group of child-trafficking paedophiles have been ruling the world for many decades and that President Trump had a secret plan in place to bring this group to justice. QAnon conspiracy followers have also capitalised on the COVID-19 protest movement, with the pandemic providing a perfect environment for the expansion of established conspiracy theories around elite control which sit at the core of the QAnon movement. ISD analysts identified significant online surges in support of the QAnon movement which corresponded with the global growth of the pandemic in March 2020.<sup>29</sup> Much of 2020 was taken up with ongoing, and increasingly on-the-ground, activism in support of their main conspiracy. However, as the year progressed, QAnon followers pivoted towards promoting voter fraud conspiracies that supported President Trump's claims about a stolen election and then, post January 2021 when Trump left office, these communities started to pivot towards anti-vaccine activism.<sup>30</sup>

Through a combination of mass de-platforming of the conspiracy movement by Facebook and YouTube in late 2020 and in early 2021, QAnon communities migrated to the encrypted messaging platform, Telegram. Telegram is a space now used to advance an ever-evolving web of conspiracies that claim (in a non-exhaustive list): COVID-19 was cover for a secret depopulation agenda by world elites; vaccines are bioweapons designed by corrupt government officials and pharmaceutical companies; and that, fundamentally, the vaccines are deadly and will ultimately kill people.<sup>31</sup>

QAnon-influenced political representatives have been at the forefront of anti-mask mandate activism, in particular Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene.<sup>32</sup> The Georgia politician has compared mask mandates within the House of Representatives in Washington DC to the Holocaust;<sup>33</sup> has boasted that she has been fined over \$60,000 for refusing to wear a mask in congress;<sup>34</sup> and supported anti-mask mandate protests at school board meetings.<sup>35</sup> Greene has also compared the masking of children in schools to "child abuse."<sup>36</sup>

Separately, when Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds signed a bill prohibiting mask mandates in schools in the state, pictured beside her were two activists with links to QAnon, according to Politifact.<sup>37</sup> While in Florida, an anti-mask protester berated a school board by describing them as "paedophiles" and claiming that masks are a "sexual fetish," which appeared to be indirect references to QAnon and Pizzagate conspiracies.<sup>38</sup>

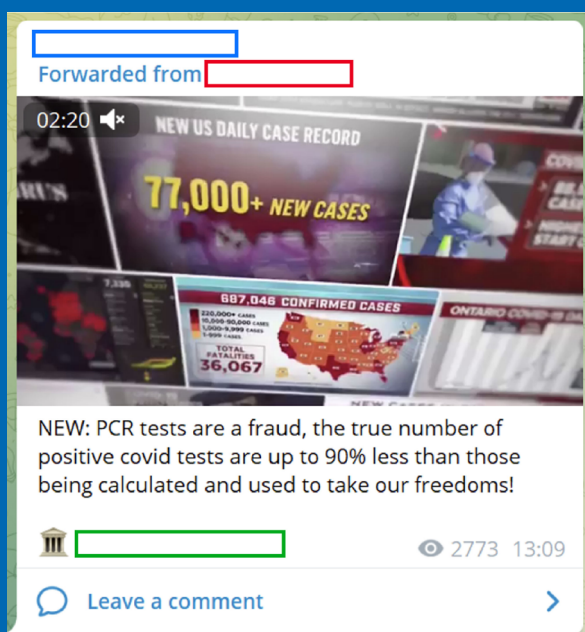


Figure 1: A screenshot from a QAnon Telegram channel promoting conspiracies about COVID-19.



## OVERVIEW OF HARMFUL ACTIVITY

In 2021, schools and school boards became a new battleground for ‘culture wars’ dynamics in the US, largely driven by the influence and impact of a variety of conservative activists and groups,<sup>39</sup> QAnon influencers, right-wing extremist groups and wider opposition towards issues both related to COVID-19, such as mask mandates, and unrelated, such as critical race theory (CRT).<sup>40</sup> This is an academic concept that analyses systemic racism in legal and public contexts, though the phrase has largely morphed into a catch-all term to describe teaching children anything related to diversity, racial equality or LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>41</sup> Backlash to CRT has been promoted by various figures from right-wing political and media circles including Christopher Rufo,<sup>42</sup> a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute think tank; Fox News;<sup>43</sup> One America News;<sup>44</sup> former President Trump advisor Steve Bannon;<sup>45</sup> and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.<sup>46</sup>

Though separate issues, both masks and CRT have been framed as debates around freedom and identity, specifically the freedom to reject masks and the teachings of CRT. Within conspiratorial communities, the idea that CRT is “indoctrination” and that masks are being used to silence and suppress dissent proved popular, especially within QAnon communities where ideas around protecting children from supposed harms have played a central role in the movement.

Online, discussions around infiltrating school boards started in early 2021, when figures like Sidney Powell, a former attorney for President Trump turned QAnon promoter and influencer, posted on Telegram encouraging people to “get involved in the political activities in your cities and towns and counties. . . Get a group of at least 10 people together and go to EVERY county commissioners meeting, every city council meeting, every school board meeting.”<sup>47</sup> Powell’s calls were echoed by other leading voices among QAnon conspiracy communities such as Dave Hayes, better known as Praying Medic, and Lin Wood, another former Trump associate turned QAnon conspiracy theorist, in the months that followed.

Figures from the far-right also echoed these calls, including Joey Gibson, founder of the far-right group Patriot Prayer, who shared a video on his Telegram channel showing what he described as a father “unleash[ing]” on a school board.<sup>48</sup> The website VDARE, which hosts white nationalist content, also published pieces criticising supposed ‘anti-white racism’ in practice in school boards across the country,<sup>49</sup> while criticising “public school propagandists” and the “the brazen abuse of authority exercised by educators” in enforcing mask-wearing within schools. This highlights how a coalition of far-right and conspiratorial forces have inadvertently joined forces in using schools as a new battleground.<sup>50</sup>

@RealGenFlynn

1. Demand that your county or state conduct an election system audit.
2. Attend a school board hearing to stop forcing our children to be indoctrinated by CRT or forced mask wear (“they don’t work”).
3. Run for a local office.
4. Support your local Sheriff’s department by backing their efforts to enforce the law in your counties...if your sheriff isn’t, vote them out. But Back the Blue—Don’t Defund the Police—that’s total nonsense.
5. Volunteer at the polls where elections occur.
6. Tell your pastors to fully open their churches.
7. Don’t submit to medical tyranny — your health is your choice.
8. Pray often for our nation.

I’m certain there are dozens of other ideas. Main point is stop complaining and stand up and step up and get involved.

Figure 2: QAnon influencer General Michael Flynn discusses masks and CRT

## OVERVIEW OF HARMFUL ACTIVITY

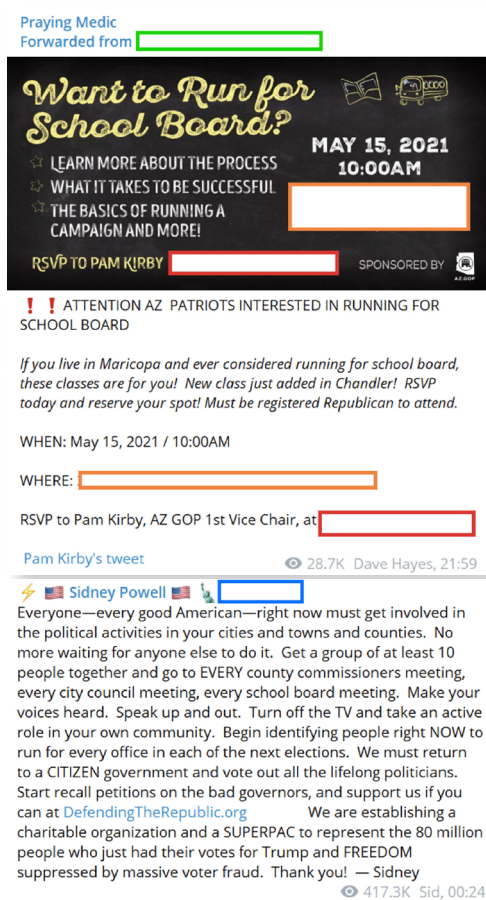


Figure 3: QAnon influencers Praying Medic and Sidney Powell encourage followers to run for school board

Throughout the summer, videos of heated exchanges at school board meetings,<sup>51</sup> sometimes turning threatening and violent,<sup>52</sup> went viral online and made headlines across the US. Some parents falsely equated the teaching of LGBTQ+ issues to paedophilia<sup>53</sup> and compared mask mandates to child abuse.<sup>54</sup> News reports found evidence that the Proud Boys were also involved in a number of these protests around the country.<sup>55</sup> Increasingly threatening behaviour towards school board members resulted in members quitting under a barrage of abuse<sup>56</sup> and calls for the Biden administration to step in and investigate the behaviour.<sup>57</sup>

False claims about COVID-19 vaccines being dangerous or lethal, as well as the consistent touting of unproven cures and treatments for the virus by individuals and organisations known to share disinformation, resulted in often violent harassment directed towards healthcare workers working to fight the virus. In some hospitals, staff were given panic buttons in order to alert security staff when they were in danger, and reports from across the country explained how patients would become belligerent if they were refused access to alternative treatments.<sup>58</sup>

In early September 2021, protesters attended a Chicago hospital after QAnon influencer Veronica Wolski was refused Ivermectin by doctors who were treating her for COVID-19.<sup>59</sup> Lin Wood,<sup>60</sup> a lawyer and leading QAnon figure who pushed failed voter fraud cases and at one time claimed to represent Kenosha shooter Kyle Rittenhouse, encouraged his followers to call the hospital and threaten the staff with claims that “Nuremberg trials” would follow the pandemic. Wolski died from complications due to COVID-19 a number of days later.<sup>61</sup>

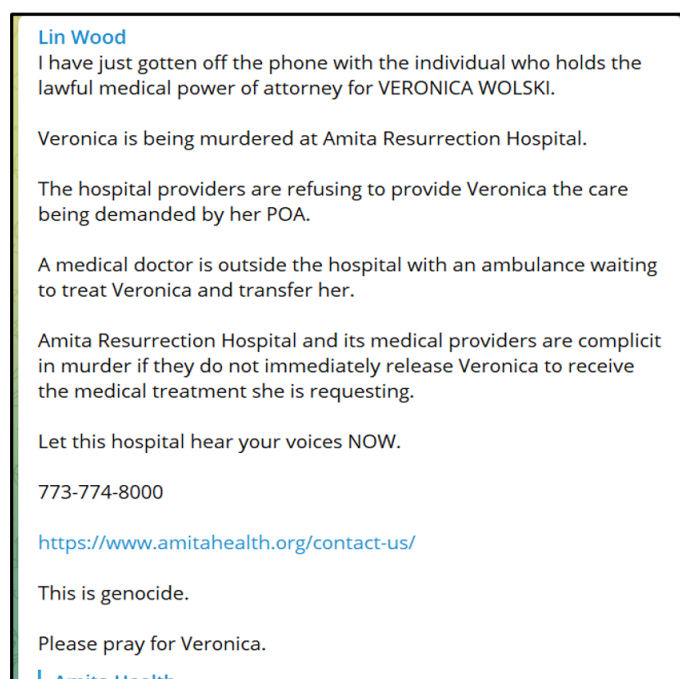


Figure 4: Lin Wood encourages his followers to call Amita Resurrection Hospital where Veronica Wolski was a patient

COVID-19 vaccination centres were also the targets of protests and violence. In February 2021, a vaccination centre in Los Angeles had to temporarily close after a group of anti-vaccine, anti-mask and QAnon supporters gathered outside to protest what they believed was an “indoctrination” and mind-control project.<sup>62</sup> In August 2021, another anti-vaccine rally in Los Angeles turned violent when one protester was stabbed after tensions boiled over with a group of counter protesters.<sup>63</sup>

In an example of how conspiratorial thinking around COVID-19 and vaccines can combine with poor mental health into a deadly force, in October 2021 a man in Baltimore was charged with the killing of his brother, a pharmacist, and his sister-in-law.<sup>64</sup> According to documents filed with the charges, the man had told a number of people that he thought his brother was “killing people with the COVID shot” by administering the vaccines.



## CONCLUSION

In the 18 months since the beginning of the pandemic, the US political landscape has become ever more polarised, while 'culture war' arguments over masks, lockdowns and vaccines have resulted in the convergence and mainstreaming of movements that operate along a common thread of disinformation and conspiracism.

The politicisation of a safe and effective vaccine against the COVID-19 virus has contributed to the US' struggle to bring an end to a pandemic. Surging COVID-19 cases have put a strain on already struggling hospitals in states such as Montana, Ohio and Kentucky, resulting in some facilities having to ration the care they give to non-COVID patients.<sup>65</sup>

The threatening behaviour exhibited at school board meetings is, in some cases, exacerbating other 'culture war' battles. Meanwhile, prolonged debate over mask mandates is also resulting in children and teachers being put at further risk of contracting COVID-19.

The effects of the pandemic mixed with the fallout from the 2020 election and the widespread belief in the 'Big Lie' (former President Trump's false claim of a stolen election), has deepened the conspiratorial mindset in the US, resulting in rising levels of distrust in healthcare, democratic institutions and the media.<sup>66</sup> This conspiratorial mindset mixed with active far-right and militia groups is a potentially dangerous combination, and the ability of these movements to converge and mobilise around a given subject is a serious cause for concern.

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A thick, white, horizontal brushstroke graphic with irregular, feathered edges, serving as a background for the title text.

**THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM**