

Focus on US mass shooters' political beliefs undermines fight against gun violence by Aben  Clayton, *The Guardian*, 2 October 2025

5 It's a common feature in the response to the high-profile acts of gun violence in the US: among the first, if not the first, element in a shooter's background to be scrutinized is their political beliefs. The recent spate of mass shootings has followed this same playbook. After Charlie Kirk's shooting, Republican officials were quick to paint the suspect as "a radical leftist". When a young man opened fire at a Texas ICE facility last
10 week authorities, the media quickly turned to the question of his political camp. But leaning so heavily on shooters' political identity to understand mass violence fails to capture the evolving profile of people who decide to enact mass and targeted violence, said Matthew Kriner, from the Institute for countering digital extremism.

15 Identifying shooters as either Democrats or Republicans goes against a growing body of research showing that the nation's most high-profile shootings in recent years have been committed by people who were most influenced by online spaces, where traditional politics is largely irrelevant. "When we try to distill them into a simple binary of politics, we're missing the larger picture," Kriner said. "These actors are not solely motivated by that, and it's missing the grievance that's driving this violence that
20 is not ideological, partisan or political." He said: "What we find is that individuals can fixate on violence regardless of their racial or political or religious characteristics."

More and more, high-profile shooters are influenced by other shooters who came before them, and the nihilistic, conspiratorial and extremist beliefs they often subscribe to.

25 The 23-year-old who shot and killed 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007 was inspired by the two Columbine high school shooters. The 18-year-old who shot and killed 10 Black people in a Buffalo grocery store in 2022 had been inspired by the white supremacist who had killed 51 people across two New Zealand mosques three years prior.

30 The digital footprint of these shooters, who left behind online writings on their beliefs, contradictory as they may be, is a clear example of how the internet has changed the way people become radicalized, Kriner said. Instead of meeting a neo-Nazi in their local neighborhood and reading literature, the young suspects of today are seeing prior shooters become memes to be passed around and built upon, he explained.

35 "There's a compilation of ideological influences, not a singular focus," Kriner added. "The internet is changing the way individuals are radicalizing. There are fewer ideological hard."

While experts such as Kriner argue we should de-prioritize the focus on political beliefs in favor of studying how shooters radicalize, that does not mean we should ignore
40 historical indicators of mass violence, such as a fixation on other shooters and serial killers and deep-seated hate toward minorities. But, they should be evaluated alongside a rapidly changing landscape of radicalization, Kriner added.

But this kind of research is now under threat from cuts made by the Trump administration.

45 "We won't get to a solution if our only question is: were they a Democrat or Republican," Kriner added. (506 words)