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A Decade of Public Opinion Shows Little Evidence of Veteran Extremism

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Abstract

Public discourse often portrays U.S. military veterans as uniquely vulnerable to political extremism. Analyzing ten waves of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (2015–2024) and more than 1.5 million respondents, we evaluate whether veterans and current service members* hold more extreme political views than civilians. We craft an Extreme Views Index combining weighted, multi-item measures of domain-specific extremism in militarism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism, and find that veterans are not uniformly more extreme than civilians. Domain-specific differences we do observe are modest and in the range of about 1-5%: veterans express slightly more extreme immigration attitudes and slightly elevated racial conservatism, while current service members express the strongest gender-related extremism. Civilians, meanwhile, match or exceed veterans in militaristic extremity. Interpreting these patterns through the 3T framework – transmission, trauma, and transition – we see signatures of the impact of heterogeneous service-related experiences and post-service transition stress on the one hand, and similarities between veterans and civilians in attitudinal extremism that stem from the same polarized environment on the other. We discuss our findings in relation to recent reports that military service predicts insurrectionist sentiment.

Keywords: Veterans; Political; Extremism; Civil; Military; Relations; Polarization; Militarism; Xenophobia; Racism; Sexism; Moral; Injury; Political; Service; Public; Opinion; CCES; Radicalization; Democratic; Stability

Introduction

Public conversation about U.S. military veterans includes threads of deep admiration and concern about radicalization. Research in political behavior, psychology, and civil–military relations offers clues regarding the extent to which veterans hold more extreme political attitudes than civilians. Some studies describe veterans as active, disciplined, and politically conservative; others reveal wide diversity shaped by era, branch of service, and post-military experiences. Yet, a large body of scholarship indicates that the ideological distribution and political engagement of veterans largely resemble that of civilians, with instances of extremist drift attributable to transition stress, disillusionment, trauma, or identity disruption rather than military culture itself. To understand the issue, it helps to trace how veterans are socialized, how modern polarization affects them, and draw on what research says about trauma, trust, and identity after service to assess attitudinal evidence of veteran extremism.

Next, we anchor our effort to leading statements about civil-military relations, foundational scholarship on the disparate challenges associated with transitioning to civilian life after military service, and the increasingly established knowledge about the contemporary political environment that shape veterans and civilians alike. Synthesizing our review of the literature with the 3T model of veteran extremism and radicalization [1], we identify a gap in what we know about veteran extremism, and present hypotheses related to that gap. Following that we assess patterns in political attitudes across the civil-military divide. Our key findings indicate military veterans are no more radical or extreme than their civilian counterparts. We end with reflections on the importance of modeling soldier-citizens as sensitive to broader shifts in the political climate that influences the entire polity.

What we know about the civil-military divide and veteran transition into civilian political life

Decades of scholarship show that veterans are active participants in democracy, not outliers. They vote more, follow politics closely, and share roughly the same ideological distribution as civilians [2, 3]. Moreover, polarization in the United States affects them through the same identity mechanisms that affect civilians [4, 5], reinforcing the observation that veterans are shaped by the broader political environment rather than set apart from it. What differentiates the small fraction who develop extreme views is not their military service itself but the experiences that complicate it: trauma, transition stress,

or moral disillusionment [6, 7]. Recent studies, from RAND [8] through Atuel and Castro [1], further confirm that while extremist attitudes do exist within the veteran population, they remain limited in scope, highly contextual, and deeply contingent on post-service experiences.

Early studies of civil–military relations identified a cultural "gap" between soldiers and civilians. Feaver and Kohn [9] argued that military life, built on hierarchy and duty, produces distinct outlooks on authority and service. Yet that difference does not automatically translate into political extremity. In his detailed study of the 2004 presidential election, Teigen [2] found that once age, education, and partisanship were considered, veterans looked much like everyone else at the ballot box. They were slightly more likely to participate in politics, but not more extreme in ideology. More recent work shows that military identity continues to shape how the public perceives veterans. Golby, Feaver, and Dropp [3] demonstrate that endorsements from military figures can move civilian opinion about the use of force. Their research highlights credibility and symbolism more than rigid ideology. Overall, these studies portray veterans as engaged citizens rather than as a unified and extreme political bloc. The associated insights are important to veterans as the military is intertwined with collective identity, in which loyalty, teamwork, and the overarching mission triumph over the individual's preference. Once veterans are reintroduced to a polarized society centered on partisan identity, the habit of solidarity may foster a heightened sensitivity to potential threats to the group's values and status.

Black veterans in the postwar South encapsulate how militarism can intersect with broader societal hierarchies, including racism, and shift how veterans navigate political life after service. As Parker (2009) teaches, soldier-citizenship experiences transform civic ideologies at the individual-level, and can catalyze high political engagement to fuel collective freedom struggles. Analogous transformations in civic ideology following military service may operate for people whose identities reflect other social cleavages, like the case of indigeneity, nativity, and ethnicity that interrogates xenophobia [10, 11], and liberation movements led by women who have worn the uniform [12]. These forces do not predetermine extremist drift, but they help foreshadow the kinds of structural pressures that can shape grievance formation in contemporary politics.

To judge whether veterans are "extreme," it helps to first appreciate how polarization has transformed American politics in general. Abramowitz and Saunders [13] note that Americans have become more consistent in ideology, while Iyengar and Westwood [4] show that emotional dislike of the other party, or what they call affective polarization, is now the real dividing line. Work by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes [14] and by Lelkes [5] found that partisanship now operates like a social identity, often tied to morality and belonging. Mason [15] further demonstrates that this process has intensified through social sorting, whereby partisan identities increasingly align with racial, religious, and ideological identities, reducing cross-pressures and heightening affective polarization across the electorate.

Those insights matter for veterans because the military also facilitates a collective identity. Service emphasizes loyalty, teamwork, and mission over individual preference. When veterans re-enter a polarized society, they bring with them strong habits of solidarity developed through military socialization. Research on gender integration in operational military units further shows that these solidaristic norms have historically been embedded within masculine organizational cultures that privilege hierarchy, endurance, and role differentiation, even as formal gender integration expands. This is highlighted by Janowitz's [16] account of enduring occupational identity and by Atuel and Castro's [1] emphasis on tight in-group bonds that can heighten their sensitivity to political identities and intergroup divides. This means that any assessment of veteran extremism must be anchored to a clear baseline: civilians themselves have changed dramatically as polarization has intensified. As a result, absolute differences that may have existed between veterans and civilians before the rise of acute polarization cannot be assumed to carry the same meaning or magnitude today. Still, empirical work by Teigen [2], RAND [8], and Pape et al. [17] shows that the forces driving polarization among civilians, partisan identity, ideological sorting, and affective animus operate in nearly identical ways among veterans, suggesting they are shaped by the same political environment rather than set apart from it.

Psychological research helps explain why a small subset of veterans may develop unusually strong political attitudes. Litz et al. [6] describe moral injury as the emotional damage that occurs when someone feels they have violated their own moral code during war. Such injuries can erode trust in institutions and color political outlooks. Subsequent clinical work by Griffin et al. [18] has expanded this framework, emphasizing that moral injury is frequently associated with social withdrawal, alienation, and diminished trust in authority and civic institutions. Wong and Gerras [7] discuss a related idea: how soldiers learn to navigate "necessary dishonesty" inside bureaucratic systems. When that kind of ethical dissonance follows service members into civilian life, it can turn into deep skepticism toward authority. Political psychology connects these experiences to the formation of beliefs. Miller, Saunders, and Farhart [19] show that people with low trust in government tend to adopt conspiracy theories to protect their worldview. Uscinski and Parent [20] trace this impulse through American history, arguing that conspiratorial thinking is a durable cultural style rather than a fringe pathology. For some veterans, feelings of betrayal or abandonment can activate the same defensive reasoning, turning ordinary mistrust into sharper ideological certainty.

Populist politics adds another layer. Oliver and Rahn [21] define populism as a moral conflict between virtuous citizens and corrupt elites. That story can resonate with veterans who already see themselves as defenders of the nation's moral core. Hodges [22], in his analysis of veterans who joined the January 6 Capitol riot, found that most described their actions as a patriotic defense of the republic rather than an attack on it. Their nationalism was emotional and identity-driven, not purely ideological. Still, large-scale evidence shows that most veterans reject such behavior. Atuel and Castro [1] capture this conditional pattern in their 3T Model: Transmission of Prejudice, Trauma, Adversity, and Transition. They argue that extremism only arises in a small percentage of the active-duty and veteran population, with the infrequent cases being attributable to disrupted identity or difficult reintegration, not military culture itself.

In a representative survey of roughly 1,000 veterans, one of the most comprehensive data collections comes from RAND [8], whereby researchers found that only a small minority expressed positive feelings toward extremist groups. Support for conspiracy narratives such as QAnon or the "Great Replacement" theory was about the same as in the general public. Most veterans rejected political violence altogether. Those who did endorse it tended to be younger and concentrated in certain branches, especially the Marine Corps. Taken at face value, the RAND findings suggest that veterans are broadly similar to civilians in their rejection of extremism.

Subsequent work has refined and, in certain respects, challenged that conclusion. Drawing on a demographically matched national sample of veterans under sixty-five and non-veterans, Pape, Ruby, and Parkin [17] demonstrate that military service itself constitutes an independent predictor of insurrectionist sentiment. Even after adjusting for partisanship, prior legal history, education, and personality traits, veteran status increased the probability of endorsing insurrection-justifying statements by approximately fifteen percent relative to civilians. Their controlled-direct-effect models further

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reveal that neither far-right conspiracy belief nor pro-Trump affect fully mediates this relationship. Rather, negative or traumatic military experiences significantly amplify it: veterans who report psychological injury or dissatisfaction with their service exhibit the highest levels of insurrectionist sentiment. Pape et al. interpret these results as contemporary evidence of the widening civil–military gap first theorized by Feaver and Kohn [9], contending that post–All-Volunteer-Force recruitment and political socialization have produced a cohort increasingly distinct, and at times alienated, from civilian society.

Qualitative work adds depth to these numbers. Reyes-Skindziel [23] studied veterans who entered extremist networks and found that loneliness, peer influence, and the search for meaning were central motives. Atuel and Castro [1] make similar observations: when leaving the military, veterans sometimes lose a sense of identity and belonging, creating openings that extremist recruiters exploit. These findings link back to the concept of moral injury; when trust and purpose collapse, anger can be reframed as a political mission. Classic sociological works remain relevant here. Janowitz [16] portrayed military service as a civic training ground that fosters typical discipline and responsibility. Snider [24] described the Army profession as an ethical community whose norms sustain democracy. When veterans feel cut off from those norms, the same discipline that once reinforced civic loyalty can fuel resentment. That paradox lies at the heart of current research on veteran extremism.

A key gap in veteran extremism knowledge and proposed hypotheses

Several questions remain open. Because most existing studies rely on cross-sectional data, it is difficult to determine whether veterans' political attitudes stem from pre-service dispositions or emerge through military experience and post-service transition. Comparative work across eras and branches may someday clarify how institutional cultures interact with today's polarized political environment, and future research could more directly link psychological factors, such as moral injury and trust, to patterns of political engagement. What the literature does show is that the core values cultivated through service: duty, loyalty, and collective identity, and how this carries a dual potential. Under strain, they can sharpen into grievance, but in many veterans, they may instead temper or mute extremist tendencies. This pattern suggests that the emergence of extremism is shaped as much by broader political and social context as by military identity itself, much like civilians who react differently to stressors depending on circumstance. Recognizing these contingent pathways does not resolve the field's methodological limits, but it does highlight the importance of identifying when strain channels military-shaped values toward extremist expression and when it does not. Such awareness is essential for understanding the complex ways veterans engage in democratic life.

Taken together, this literature shows that veteran political attitudes emerge from the interaction of personal experience, institutional identity, and a polarized political environment. With this background in mind, we evaluate the following hypotheses:

H1: Military veterans express more extreme political views than civilians, in general.

H2: Military veterans express more extreme political views than civilians, in particular, on matters of militarism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism relative to civilians.

The following section builds on these insights by outlining the study's research design, describing the data, measures, and methodological approach used to assess how these mechanisms operate empirically. This sets the stage for the results and discussion that follow, which evaluate whether the patterns identified in prior research appear in the present study.

Materials and Methods

Data and Sample

The study draws on pooled cross-sectional data from the 2015–2024 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Across these ten waves, the combined dataset includes more than 376,000 civilians, 19,500 veterans, and 2,300 current service members, providing a sufficient sample size to support subgroup comparisons. Because the CCES questionnaire varies slightly across years, all items used in this analysis were harmonized prior to merging, and survey-year indicators were retained for weighting and contextual interpretation. Military service is measured using the CCES *milstat* variable. A three-category military-status variable (vetstat) was constructed to distinguish civilians, veterans, and current service members (active duty, National Guard, or reserves). These categories parallel distinctions highlighted in the literature on civil–military relations and political behavior, which emphasize the social, institutional, and identity-based contexts that shape veteran attitudes. Consistent with prior scholarship, we treat "veterans" not as a homogeneous political bloc but as a broad category reflecting diverse service histories and trajectories.

Attitudinal Domains and Operationalization of Extremism

Following the literature's emphasis on multidimensional extremism, particularly Pape, Ruby, and Parkin's [17] argument that extreme beliefs vary by domain and are often tied to attitudes toward force, hierarchy, or exclusion, we analyzed four domains of political attitudes:

1. **Militarism** (military force, interventionism)
2. **Xenophobia** (immigration restriction)
3. **Racism*** (racial resentment and race-related policy attitudes)
4. **Sexism** (gender-role traditionalism and gender-equality policy attitudes)

We operationalize each conceptual domain with multiple CCES survey items, some having as few as five and others as many as nine, depending on availability in a given year. To reflect the literature's distinction between routine policy preferences and high-consequence, morally charged, or punitive attitudes, each survey item was recoded so that higher values reflected more extreme, exclusionary, or interventionist positions. Items were assigned weights ranging from 1 to 3. *Simple restrictive positions* were assigned 1 point. *Positions endorsing harsh, aggressive, or force-oriented actions* (e.g., drone strikes, deportation mass sweeps, military actions against foreign adversaries) were assigned 2–3 points. This weighting approach reflects insights from RAND [8], Litz et al. [6], and Oliver & Rahn [21], all of whom highlight that extremism is best understood as endorsement of the most consequential or morally intense political positions—not mere ideological consistency. Each domain's weighted responses were summed and then divided into equal terciles to create categories of Weak (1–3), Moderate (4–6), and Extreme (7–9) attitudes. The domain-specific scales enable identification of patterns consistent with the literature's observation that extremism among veterans is domain-specific rather than generalized [3, 17]. Chi-Squares were used to calculate the significance and strength of our findings. Pairing these systematized concepts with measures that capture the underlying theoretical variation of each positions us to evaluate hypothesis two, which intuits that veterans express more militarism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism relative to civilians.

Combined "Extreme Views" Index

To summarize attitudinal extremity across domains, we constructed a continuous Extreme Views Index (EV) for each group-year observation. First, within each domain, the share of respondents categorized as *Weak, Moderate, or Extreme* was converted to a weighted extremism score:

$$EV_{\text{domain}} = 1(\%Weak) + 2(\%Moderate) + 3(\%Extreme)$$

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This yields a domain-level value ranging from 100 (all Weak) to 300 (all Extreme). We then averaged values across domains. Years with complete data (2015–2020, 2022, 2024) were averaged across four domains (EV/4), whereas years without racial attitude measures (2021, 2023) were averaged across the three available domains (EV/3):

$$EV_{\text{overall}} = \frac{\sum EV_{\text{domain}}}{k} \quad \text{where } k \in \{3, 4\}$$

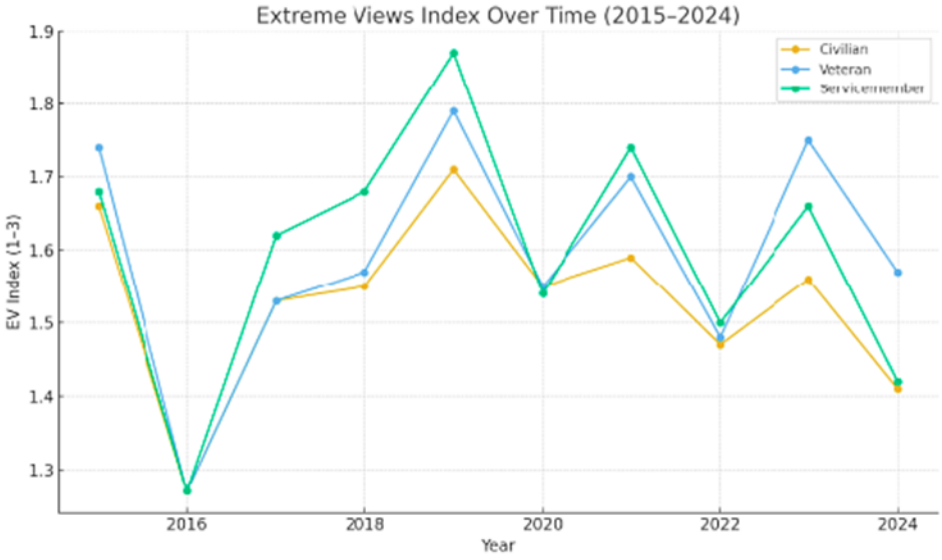
Finally, the index was rescaled to a 1–3 scale by dividing by 100, with 1 corresponding to uniformly weak attitudes and 3 to uniformly extreme attitudes. We retain the continuous EV measure rather than rounding or categorizing the distribution to preserve meaningful variation across years and respondent groups (see Table 1; Figure 1). With this measure in hand, we are ready to evaluate hypothesis 1, which captures our expectation that military veterans express more extreme political views than civilians, in general.

Weighting and Analytical Strategy

All analyses employ CCES-provided survey weights to ensure population-representative estimates. Weighted proportions were calculated for each group within each extremism category across domains. The analysis is intentionally descriptive, consistent with the literature emphasizing that veterans and civilians are shaped by nearly identical social and political forces [4, 5, 8].

While the literature identifies mechanisms such as trauma, transition stress, moral injury, and identity disruption as potential drivers of extremism, the CCES does not include direct measures of these concepts. As such, this analysis does not attempt to identify causal processes. Instead, it characterizes the distribution of attitudinal extremity among civilians, veterans, and current service members, and interprets those distributions in light of established theoretical expectations.

Figure 1. Extreme Views Index (EV) by Military Status, 2015–2024



Year	Civilian	Veteran	Servicemember
2015	1.66	1.74	1.68
2016	1.27	1.27	1.27
2017	1.53	1.53	1.62
2018	1.55	1.57	1.68
2019	1.71	1.79	1.87
2020	1.55	1.55	1.54
2021*	1.59	1.70	1.74
2022	1.47	1.48	1.50
2023*	1.56	1.75	1.66
2024	1.41	1.57	1.42

Table 1: Extreme Views Index (EV)by Military Status, 2015-2024

(*2021 & 2023 EV are based on 3 domains; all other years on all 4)

These differences are not significant in absolute terms, but they are substantively consistent: veterans, while slightly more likely than civilians to occupy the more intense (moderate or extreme) ends of the attitudinal spectrum across the four domains, show very little deviance from their civilian or currently serving counterparts.

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Results

Overall Distribution of Extreme Views

Across all ten CCES waves from 2015 to 2024, the corrected pooled analytic sample includes more than 376,000 civilians, 19,500 veterans, and 2,300 current service members. Collapsing the four attitudinal domains, militarism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism, into a combined "Extreme Views" index, the distribution of respondents across weak, moderate, and extreme categories is broadly similar across groups, but with meaningful differences in the location of veterans and current service members along this spectrum.

We summarize attitudinal extremism using a continuous Extreme Views (EV) Index ranging from 1 (uniformly weak) to 3 (uniformly extreme). Across the 2015–2024 period, all three groups exhibit relatively low average extremism, with civilians ranging from 1.41 in 2024 to 1.71 in 2019, veterans from 1.27 in 2016 to 1.79 in 2019, and current service members from 1.27 in 2016 to 1.87 in 2019 (see Table 1; Figure 1). Differences between groups are modest and vary by year rather than following a consistent hierarchical pattern. Veterans score slightly higher than civilians in several years, particularly 2019 (1.79 to 1.71) and 2023 (1.75 to 1.56), while service members diverge most strongly in earlier years (2017 - 2019), especially on gender attitudes.

Militarism

Contrary to common stereotypes of veterans as uniquely hawkish, the militarism scale reveals relatively modest, and sometimes counterintuitive, differences among the three groups, **$\chi^2(4, N = 397{,}906) = 353.57, p < .001$**. When attitudes toward military intervention are summarized into weak, moderate, and extreme militarism, extreme militarism is comparatively uncommon across all groups and years. EV militarism values typically range from 1.4 to 1.7, indicating that most respondents fall into the weak or moderate categories. The evidence indicates that veterans are not uniformly more hawkish than civilians. In many years, civilians exhibit equal or higher extremism (e.g., 2018–2019), while veterans tend to cluster in moderate positions. Service members show a spike in extreme militarism in 2019 (consistent with elevated post-conflict polarization), but this declines sharply by 2024 (See Table 2).

R's Militarism (3-pt)	Civilian	Veteran	Servicemembers
Weak Militarism	53.9	50.7	58
Moderate Militarism	37.7	41.3	34.2
Extreme Militarism	8.4	8.0	7.8
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Table 2: Combined Militarism by Veteran Status (%), 2015-2024

Two patterns stand out. First, differences in militaristic extremism are minor: roughly 8% of respondents in each group fall into the "extreme" category, with civilians actually exhibiting a slightly higher rate of extreme militarism than veterans or service members (8.4% vs. 8.0% and 7.8%). Second, veterans are somewhat more likely than both civilians and current service members to cluster in the moderate militarism category. Indeed, the share of current service members who express "weak" militarism is higher than the share for both civilians and veterans, perhaps reflecting a clear-eyed and personal awareness of how militarism relates to elevated prospects for war. Overall, as measured here, the militarism domain offers little evidence that veterans or current service members are uniquely prone to extreme pro-intervention views.

Xenophobia

Our measurement approach classifies approximately half of each subgroup as holders of "weak" xenophobia attitudes. Still, xenophobia is the domain showing the most consistent divergence among groups. Veterans exhibit elevated xenophobic extremism than civilians in multiple years (2017, 2019, 2023–24), with EV values approaching 2.0 in peak years, **$\chi^2(4, N = 397{,}906) = 583.44, p < .001$**. Service members consistently display lower xenophobic extremism than veterans but higher moderate xenophobia levels in earlier years (2019–21). These patterns align with theories linking identity threat, populist framing, and political distrust to anti- immigrant attitudes, though causal mechanisms cannot be inferred from descriptive data (See Table 3).

R's Xenophobia (3-pt)	Civilian	Veteran	Servicemembers
Weak Xenophobia	56.3	47.1	52.8
Moderate Xenophobia	23.2	27.9	33.1
Extreme Xenophobia	20.6	25.0	14.1
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Table 3: Combined Xenophobia by Veteran Status (%), 2015-2024

Compared to civilians, veterans are less likely to express weakly exclusionary views and more likely to fall into the "extreme" xenophobia category. Current service members, by contrast, tend to be more concentrated in the moderate category and less concentrated in the extreme category than veterans. Put differently, veterans stand out as the most immigration-restrictive of the three groups, with about one in four holding the most exclusionary immigration attitudes, while current service members occupy an intermediate and more moderate position.

This pattern suggests that the modest overall differences observed in the combined Extreme Views index are driven in part by more extreme immigration attitudes among veterans relative to civilians.

Racism

Racial attitudes were not available in the 2021 and 2023 CCES waves; therefore, results for racism reflect a subset of years. Even within this restricted set, however, the overwhelming majority of respondents in all groups fall into the weak racism category, with very small shares classified as extreme, **$\chi^2(4, N = 347{,}706) = 43.06, p < .001$**. Racial extremism is low across all groups, with EV values approaching the minimum across every year. Extremism remains below 2% in most samples, though veterans show slightly higher shares than civilians in select years (e.g., 2019), and service members exhibit near-zero extreme racial attitudes in later years (2020–2024). These findings suggest that racial attitudes contribute minimally to group differences in the combined EV index (See Table 4).

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R's Racism (3-pt)	Civilian	Veteran	Servicemembers
Weak Racism	79.0	76.2	79.4
Moderate Racism	19.9	21.6	19.5
Extreme Racism	1.5	2.3	1.1
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Table 4: Combined Racism by Veteran Status (%), 2015-2024

(*No CCES racism metrics in 2021 and 2023)

Veterans show a slightly higher concentration in the moderate and extreme categories compared to civilians and current service members, with the share of veterans in the extreme racism category roughly 50% higher than among civilians (2.3% vs. 1.5%), though both proportions are low in absolute terms. Current service members again appear similar to civilians, with the highest share of weak racial attitudes and the lowest share in the extreme category. Taken together, the racism results suggest that while extremely racist attitudes are rare across all groups, veterans are modestly more likely than civilians and current service members to occupy the more racially conservative end of the spectrum.

Sexism

Sexism, or gender attitudes, exhibits a distinct pattern in which current service members stand out more sharply than veterans, $\chi^2(4, N = 397{,}906) \approx 1{,}400$, $p < .001$. The strongest divergence among service members appears in the sexism domain, where they display substantially higher rates of extreme sexism in earlier years (2017–2020) and moderate sexism in later years. Civilian and veteran scores converge more closely over time, while service members maintain distinct patterns consistent with scholarship on gendered institutional cultures and masculine identity salience in military environments (See Table 5).

R's Sexism (3-pt)	Civilian	Veteran	Servicemembers
Weak Sexism	57.3	50.6	40.7
Moderate Sexism	35.3	41.5	44.0
Extreme Sexism	7.4	7.9	15.3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Table 5: Combined Sexism by Veteran Status (%), 2015-2024

Veterans again display a shift away from weak sexism toward the moderate category relative to civilians, but their share in the extreme sexism category is only slightly higher (7.9% vs. 7.4%). By contrast, current service members are twice as likely as civilians to fall into the extreme sexism category (15.3% vs. 7.4%), and a plurality of service members fall into the moderate rather than weak category.

Thus, whereas the militarism scale shows relatively modest differences and the racism scale shows slight but consistent differences, the sexism scale reveals a pronounced divergence for current service members: they have the lowest proportion of weak gender attitudes and the highest proportion of extreme gender attitudes of any group.

Summary: Do Veterans Hold More Extreme Views?

Across all four domains, several patterns emerge. First, at the system level, the combined Extreme Views index shows that most respondents, regardless of military status, fall into the weak extremism category, with approximately 9–11% of each group classified as extreme. In absolute terms, extremists (as defined by the top third of each domain scale) are a sizable minority but far from dominant. Thus, we uncover little evidence in support of hypothesis 1.

Second, veterans are consistently less likely than civilians to fall into the weak category and more likely to fall into the moderate or extreme categories, particularly on immigration and, to a lesser degree, racial attitudes. This pattern provides some support for the idea that veterans hold more intense or exclusionary views on specific politically divisive topics, especially xenophobia. To the extent that hen it comes to extremism that targets immigrants, we find the

Third, current service members often occupy an intermediate position between veterans and civilians. On the combined Extreme Views index, their profile is close to that of veterans. Yet the domain-specific results reveal a more nuanced picture: service members appear less extremely xenophobic than veterans, but more extremely sexist, with the highest proportion in the extreme sexism category.

Finally, the militarism results are noteworthy precisely because they do not conform to a simple "veterans are more hawkish" narrative. Civilians are, if anything, slightly more likely to fall into the extreme militarism category than veterans or current service members, while veterans are more heavily concentrated in moderate militarism.

Overall, the descriptive evidence suggests that veterans and current service members are not uniformly more extreme across all domains, but rather exhibit domain-specific patterns of extremity. Veterans diverge most on immigration-related attitudes, while service members diverge most on gender attitudes, particularly during periods of active service. Civilians themselves increasingly exhibit nontrivial levels of ideological intensity, suggesting that variation across groups must be interpreted within a broader political environment characterized by rising polarization and affective moralization. Subsequent multivariate analyses will assess whether these patterns persist after adjusting for demographic composition, partisanship, and ideology, and will examine how they evolve over time across the 2015–2024 period.

Discussion

This study set out to examine whether U.S. military veterans hold more extreme political attitudes than civilians, using nearly a decade of nationally representative CCES data and multidimensional measures of militarism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism, which were combined to form an index of extreme views by year. The results reveal a picture that is both nuanced and consistent with the broader scholarly literature: veterans and current service members are not uniformly more extreme than civilians, nor do they constitute an ideologically deviant or radicalized political bloc. Rather, observed differences are domain-specific, modest in magnitude, and embedded within the larger context of contemporary American polarization.

Across the combined "Extreme Views" index, the majority of respondents, regardless of military status, fall into the weak extremism category, reinforcing the long-standing finding that veterans largely

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resemble civilians in their political distributions. Even where veterans diverge, such as in immigration attitudes or racial conservatism, the absolute differences are small and consistent with patterns that can be explained by broader social and psychological mechanisms rather than military culture alone.

Domain-Specific Patterns and Theoretical Implications

The most evident divergence emerges in the xenophobia domain, where veterans show a higher proportion of extreme anti-immigration attitudes, specifically in 2019 (Veterans 34.17% and civilians 31.13%), 2023 (35% to 18.56%), and 2024 (30.68% to 18.62%). This aligns with theories of identity threat, populist framing, and post-service mistrust. Scholars such as Oliver and Rahn [21] and Litz et al. [6] note that when individuals experience identity disruption, moral injury, or diminished trust in institutions, exclusionary rhetoric can become more resonant. While the CCES does not directly measure these mechanisms, the pattern observed here is consistent with a subset of veterans responding to post-service experiences by gravitating toward more restrictive or protectionist views. The racism domain shows similar but even smaller differences, again consistent with conditional extremity linked to stress, transition difficulty, or disillusionment, not with military service itself. This is aligned with the 3T Model [1], which identifies trauma, transition, and transmitted prejudice as infrequent but meaningful risk factors for extremist drift.

In contrast, the militarism results complicate popular narratives regarding veterans' supposed hawkishness. Civilians are slightly more likely to fall into the extreme militarism category than either veterans or current service members. This mirrors decades of findings that military service does not produce disproportionate support for the use of force [2, 8] and reinforces Golby, Feaver, and Dropp's [3] argument that "military credibility" is often a civilian projection rather than an attribute rooted in veterans' attitudes. The sexism results tell a different story: current service members—not veterans—exhibit the highest level of extreme sexist attitudes. This aligns with research on military masculinity, professional identity, and status-threat responses [16, 24]. For individuals still embedded within a hierarchical, male-dominated institutional culture, gender attitudes may remain more traditional or defensive. Once service ends, these attitudes may soften as veterans reintegrate into broader civilian contexts. Taken together, these domain-level findings reinforce a core insight from the literature: extremism is neither monolithic nor uniformly distributed among veterans. Instead, it is shaped by interactions among identity, political environment, personal experience, and societal change.

Reframing Veteran Extremism in a Polarized Era

A central point that emerges from both the literature and these findings is that contemporary civilian political attitudes have themselves become increasingly polarized, moralized, and prone to extremity. This means that the baseline against which veterans are compared has shifted dramatically. It is therefore unsurprising that differences between veterans and civilians are modest. Both groups are navigating the same affective polarization, identity-driven politics, and intensifying partisan cues highlighted in foundational work by Iyengar and Westwood [4] and Lelkes [5]. Against this backdrop, the narrative that veterans are uniquely susceptible to radicalization appears overstated. The descriptive evidence presented here shows that civilians often hold attitudes that are as extreme or even more extreme than those of their military-affiliated counterparts, depending on the issue. This is particularly clear for militarism and sexism, where civilians and current service members diverge sharply in opposite directions. Rather than attributing extremism to military culture, the patterns observed here suggest that veterans are best understood as citizens embedded within the same polarized political system that shapes the attitudes of non-veterans.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our research is constrained by information that CCES offers, which does not include direct measures of trauma, moral injury, identity disruption, transition stress, military branch, combat experience, or reintegration difficulty, factors consistently highlighted as critical in recent scholarship [7, 17]. Although our analysis can sort patterns of extremity, we cannot adjudicate causal mechanisms. Future research would benefit from incorporating:

- panel data tracing pre-, during-, and post-service attitudes;
- psychological measures tied directly to moral injury or trust;
- branch-level and cohort-level variation;
- qualitative accounts of transition and identity renegotiation.

Such work would help clarify why a small minority of veterans exhibit extreme views and how military identity interacts with contemporary political forces.

Conclusion

The findings from this large-scale CCES analysis indicate that veterans are not, on average, more extreme than civilians, and where differences exist, they are modest, domain-specific, and theoretically interpretable. Veterans appear somewhat more extreme in immigration attitudes and slightly more so in racial attitudes, while current service members show the most substantial divergence in gender attitudes. At the same time, civilians often match or exceed veteran extremity in other domains, especially militarism. These results reinforce a central theme in the literature: extremism among veterans is conditional, rare, and context-dependent, not a defining feature of veteran political identity. Most veterans, like most civilians, occupy mainstream positions even in a polarized political era.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of situating veteran political attitudes within broader societal dynamics rather than treating them as exceptional. Veterans participate in democracy much like civilians: shaped by shared political currents, influenced by similar identity forces, and overwhelmingly committed to non-extremist beliefs. Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing accurate public narratives, informed policy discussions, and more nuanced approaches to understanding extremism in American political life.

List of Abbreviations

Vetstat3- Veteran Status: broken down into: civilians, veterans, servicemembers

EV- Extreme Views: in relation to our extreme views index

3T Model- Transmission of Prejudice, Trauma, Adversity, and Transition

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