

NOVEMBER 2023

Assessing the Effect of Political Violence on American Democracy

A Report on the Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker

Jennifer Dresden and Lilliana Mason

**The most recent VDIT data and methodological appendix are
available at:**

protectdemocracy.org/political-violence-us-democracy

or

snfagora.jhu.edu/project/protect-democracy-on-political-violence

Alexander Torpey, Selma Khalil, Jiamin Huang, Sohini Desai, Farbod Faraji, and Marsha Curtis contributed to the project. Special thanks to Brendan Nyhan, Katherine Reisner, Thania Sanchez, Alexandra Chandler, David Weinberg, Jess Marsden, Deana El-Mallawany, and Holly Idelson for comments on an earlier draft of the project. Any errors or omissions remain those of the authors.

Please direct inquiries to:
press@protectdemocracy.org

or

jhunews@jhu.edu

Report design by Sohini Desai with contributions from Alicia Gearty and Cheryl Deal.

This work was supported in part by funding received from Protect Democracy and completed as part of a joint effort between Protect Democracy and the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	04
Introduction: The Problem	06
Measuring Political Violence's Impact	08
Results	11
Conclusions	15

1 Executive Summary

There is no place for political violence in a healthy democracy. Yet the United States has seen a rise in a wide range of political violence, including threats to lawmakers and intimidation of election workers. While data on the amount of political violence in the United States has become more readily available, policymakers, advocates, philanthropists, and journalists have not had consistent data on the impact that political violence is having on the health of our democracy's core components. It is thus difficult to prioritize a response — to know which parts of our democracy are most affected, and which remain largely resilient.

This report introduces the Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT), which evaluates the apparent impact that political violence is having on eight distinct pillars of democratic practice in the United States. The Tracker surveys experts on political violence quarterly, assessing their evaluations of the current impact of political violence on freedoms of expression and association, access to the vote, election administration, equality before the law, individual liberties, and the independence of the judiciary and legislature. Experts also offer qualitative insights into the most concerning emerging trends. VDIT offers a summary snapshot of expert opinions (somewhat similar to the Bright Line Watch project), providing a helpful point of entry or comparison for those looking to gain a foothold on understanding the problem.

In the inaugural wave of the survey in July 2023, 112 experts on political violence from around the world participated. The survey results confirm that political violence is eroding American democracy on multiple axes, including — but not limited to — the administration of elections. Survey results reveal:

- The overall effect of political violence on American democracy is concerning, but not yet at crisis level.

By far the most common view among experts was that the effect of political violence on American democracy was atypical of a well-functioning democracy, but not currently indicative of imminent democratic breakdown.

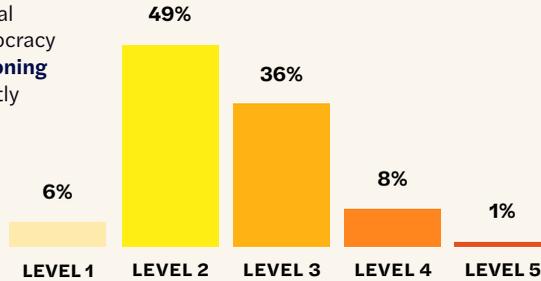
- Worries are notably higher around political violence impacting elections, where 56% of responding experts believe that we are seeing an impact that is at least meaningful enough to signal significant erosion of electoral quality and a high potential for breakdown of election processes in the future.
- More than 90% of experts considered threats and intimidation as relevant to evaluating the effects of political violence on our democracy, not just physical harm.
- According to the respondents, the top 5 most concerning aspects of political violence for American democracy are:
 1. Violence against the electoral process;
 2. Right-wing, far-right, or white nationalist violence;
 3. Escalating polarization and partisanship;
 4. Violence against marginalized communities, particularly the LGBTQ+ community; and
 5. Elites encouraging, condoning, or inciting violence.

Multiple interventions are needed to address the complex problem of political violence in our democracy. Wave 1 of the VDIT survey indicates a greater need for protecting our electoral process, including better engagement between law enforcement and election administrators, robust responses by federal and state authorities to threats and intimidation against election workers, and sustained civil society efforts to counter violence beyond a single election season.

Violence & Democracy Impact Tracker

The Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT) is a quarterly expert survey that evaluates the impact that political violence is having on eight distinct pillars of democracy in the United States: **freedoms of (1) expression and (2) association; (3) access to the vote; (4) election administration; (5) equality before the law; (6) individual liberties; and the independence of the (7) judiciary and (8) legislature.** Impact is gauged across 5 levels — with 1 being the lowest level of impact and 5 being the highest. VDIT also gathers insights from experts on the most concerning trends.

Overall, the effect of political violence on American democracy is **atypical of a well-functioning democracy**, but not currently indicative of imminent democratic breakdown.



LEVELS

- 1** Well-functioning democracy
- 2** Atypical effects, but no imminent threat of breakdown
- 3** Significant erosion of democratic quality, risk of future breakdown
- 4** Critical effects, risk of imminent breakdown
- 5** System is non-democratic

Impact on Elections

56% of experts assess the impact of political violence on elections as **Level 3** or higher, indicating significant erosion of democratic quality, risk of future breakdown for electoral processes in the future.



112

experts were surveyed in the first wave

*2% declined to specify

60% INSIDE US



38% OUTSIDE US



Top 5 Concerns From Experts

- 1** Violence against the electoral process
- 2** Right-wing, far-right, or white nationalist violence
- 3** Escalating polarization and partisanship
- 4** Violence against marginalized communities, particularly the LGBTQ+ community
- 5** Elites encouraging, condoning, or inciting violence

2 Introduction: The Problem

Political violence has become a pressing concern for American democracy.¹ Major events such as the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, violence at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, or the shooting of U.S. Congressman Steve Scalise that same year have rightly garnered extensive attention. High-visibility events are accompanied by scores of less-noted incidents, such as election workers and local officials being harassed or threatened, leading many to simply resign.² Those who find themselves targeted bear substantial individual and communal burdens, a human toll that is unacceptable in and of itself.

Yet the costs are not only individual. Many systemic effects of political violence are also festering below the surface. What is the impact of rising threats to elected officials or public demonstrations that remain technically peaceful, but include protestors who are armed?³ Are legislators still able to fulfill their role in our democracy, or do violent threats quietly impede that work in ways that may not make headlines? Do incidents of armed protest or counterprotest represent a contained phenomenon, or do they reduce the opportunity or willingness of Americans to peacefully assemble to express their grievances? Absent ways to measure the impact of violence, policymakers and advocates are left without key information needed to prioritize and shape their responses, and the public lacks context for understanding these trends.

While support for more research is certainly needed, the availability of comprehensive data on the amount of political violence in the U.S. has improved.⁴ There are also a growing number of studies about Americans' *opinions* on various forms of political violence and whether they are acceptable.⁵ These research efforts let us know how much physical violence is occurring and whether Americans are willing to accept it.

While essential, data on the amount of political violence occurring does not fully tell us *how much damage* political violence may currently be doing to American democracy or which parts of our complex political system are bearing the brunt of its effects.

The effects of political violence are not all equally severe or visible across our democracy, and some democratic institutions may be better able to withstand that impact than others. Without more context, it is difficult to know which concerns to prioritize.

The Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT) pools the insights of political violence experts on the impact of political violence on U.S. democracy. As detailed below, the tracker surveys these experts to identify the pillars of democratic practice most affected by political violence, the severity of that impact, and the aspects of political violence of greatest concern for the health of American democracy.

1 Rachel Kleinfeld, "[The Rise of Political Violence in the United States](#)," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (October 2021): 160-76.

2 Beckel, Michael, Amelia Minkin, Amisa Ratliff, Ariana Rojas, Kathryn Thomas, and Adrien Van Voorhis, "[The High Cost of High Turnover: When local election officials leave their positions in record numbers, the costs to institutional knowledge and running elections are significant](#)," *Issue One*, September 2023. For examples of news coverage of the issue, see Zack Beachamp, "[We Are Going to Make You Beg for Mercy: America's Public Servants Face a Wave of Threats](#)," *Vox*, November 18, 2021; Joan Greve, "[A Core Threat to Our Democracy: Threat of Political Violence Growing across US](#)," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2021.

3 United States Capitol Police, "[USCP Threat Assessment Cases for 2022](#)," January 17, 2023. Roudabeh Kishi, Aaron Wolfson, and Sam Jones, "[Armed Assembly: Guns, Demonstrations, and Political Violence in America](#)," ACLED and Everytown, August 2021.

4 Some of the most prominent data projects include ACLED ([acleddata.com](#)) and the Bridging Divides Initiative ([bridgingdivides.princeton.edu](#)), though many others exist.

5 See Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, & the Consequences for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2022); Joseph S. Mernyk, Sophia L. Pink, James N. Druckman, and Robb Willer, "[Correcting Inaccurate Metaperceptions Reduces Americans' Support for Partisan Violence](#)," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 16 (2022): e2116851119; Julie M. Norman, "[Other People's Terrorism: Ideology and the Perceived Legitimacy of Political Violence](#)," *Perspectives on Politics*, (2022): 1-18; Garen J. Wintemute, Sonia L. Robinson, Andrew Crawford, Daniel Tancredi, Julia P. Schleimer, Elizabeth A. Tomsich, Paul M. Reeping, Aaron B. Shev, and Veronica A. Pear, "[Views of Democracy and Society and Support for Political Violence in the USA: Findings from a Nationally Representative Survey](#)," *Injury Epidemiology* 10, no. 1 (2023): 45.

Political violence is a complex problem and its effects vary widely across the United States. Deep understanding of a problem that often operates in the shadows requires tracking a variety of data and close attention to trends and hard-to-observe factors.

Most Americans — whether they are voters, journalists, or policymakers — necessarily rely on experts to distill that information.

CHALLENGES TO ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ON DEMOCRATIC HEALTH

Unfortunately measuring the *impact* of political violence is especially challenging in the United States, where violent threats and intimidation are more common than outright physical aggression and the baseline level of social violence is already very high, even as many of our democratic institutions have a relatively long history of seeming stability and resilience.⁶

- *Baseline levels of social violence in the country are already high*, compared to other established democracies with similar socioeconomic conditions. Classifying whether violence is “political” is not always straightforward.
- *Most of the negative effects we currently see come from threats and intimidation*, not necessarily physical harm. So identifying what counts as “violence” for any incident is not straightforward.
- *Threats, intimidation, and attacks are not evenly distributed*. Women and people of color are disproportionately targeted — and there is some evidence that this leads them to “opt out” of visible public service roles in the first place.
- *Not all violent incidents are reported*, either because of the intimidating effects of political violence or other factors among particularly vulnerable groups.
- *There is not necessarily a clear correlation between the number of violent events and the impact that they have on democratic practice*. A single, large event can have high visibility and widespread impact. Many smaller, less visible events may accumulate over time, but be manageable within the resilience of our democratic system.
- *The relationship between violence and democratic erosion is reciprocal*. Violence erodes key pillars of democratic practice, but other forms of democratic breakdown also enable future violence.

⁶ See, for example, Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, “Violent Death Rates in the US Compared to Those of the Other High-Income Countries, 2015,” *Preventive Medicine* 123 (2019): 20-26.

3 Measuring Political Violence's Impact

The Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker was launched to consistently track the relationship between violence and democratic stability in the United States over time. The survey asks experts on political violence around the world to evaluate the current impact of political violence on the health of democracy in the United States. Experts are recruited into the panel based on their recent publication records on relevant topics and their professional affiliations with universities or major think tanks.⁷

VDIT aggregates expert insights on the impact of political violence across eight core pillars of democratic practice:

1. **Freedom of Expression:** including freedom of the press and individual free speech in both law and in practice.
2. **Freedom of Association:** the ability of political parties, civil society organizations, and public protest groups to operate freely and publicly, within the limits of reasonable and unbiased regulation.
3. **Voting Access:** the effective ability of all adult citizens to register and vote freely, in both law and in practice
4. **Election Processes:** the capable, impartial, and transparent administration of elections (e.g., vote casting, tabulating, and certification) and the peaceful transfer of power based on their results.
5. **Equality Before the Law:** transparency in lawmaking, impartial administration of public functions, and individuals' full and equal access to justice through law enforcement, the courts, and other administrative bodies.
6. **Protection of Individual Liberties:** freedom in both law and practice from actual or threatened physical political harm (e.g., assault, restricted movement, murder, or torture), infringements of economic rights (including property rights and freedom from forced labor), and other freedoms widely understood to be protected by the Constitution.
7. **Judicial Constraints on the Executive:** the independence of the judiciary from all forms of political interference, including universal compliance with judicial decisions, relatively high executive compliance with the Constitution and its limitations on power, and a capable judiciary.
8. **Legislative Constraints on the Executive:** the legislature having the authority and capacity to provide oversight of the executive branch, doing so vigorously in practice, and providing a meaningful forum for free political opposition.

Each survey respondent was asked to evaluate the impact of political violence on each of the above pillars of democratic practice, using a five-point scale adapted from that developed by researchers at [Authoritarian Warning Survey](#), an established, years-long study pooling experts' evaluation of the risk of overall democratic breakdown.⁸ At the bottom of the scale, respondents could indicate that violence had no impact on the pillar in question. At the top of the scale, respondents could indicate that violence had an impact so severe that the pillar was effectively nonexistent. In between those extremes, the scale levels indicate whether violence was having an impact on the functionality of that pillar at all, and whether

⁷ Experts were included in the panel based on criteria that included their professional affiliation and recent publication of significant original research on topics within the field of political violence studies. In the first wave, 738 experts qualified and were sent the survey. The panel will be updated between survey waves to account for new research published during the course of the survey. A full description of the panel is available in [the Appendix](#).

⁸ The scale from the Authoritarian Warning Survey provides a legible tool for experts to offer their holistic assessment of complex effects. Because VDIT is primarily interested in whether aspects of democratic practice continue to function, the scale's emphasis on the likelihood of breakdown is appropriate. The scale is also designed in such a way as to be easily adapted to focus on the breakdown of individual pillars of democracy.

Definitions of political violence vary. For purposes of the survey, VDIT defines political violence as **“force/violence used with a political motivation, to achieve a political goal, to assert political power over another group, or to disseminate a political message to an outside audience.”**⁹ “Force/violence” includes any form of direct physical harm or the threat thereof to persons or property, as well as intimidation in which such threats are implicit.

that impact was enough to raise the risk that the pillar would break down imminently or in the future. For example, a respondent who indicated that the impact of political violence on Freedom of Expression was at a Level 2 would likely view political violence as having a negative effect on press freedom or individual speech, but not such a severe impact that the respondent worried about the loss of that freedom on a large scale.

By contrast, a respondent who rated Freedom of Expression at a Level 3 might see violent threats or attacks on journalists as seriously eroding press freedom in practice to such an extent that, absent change, there would be a high risk that in the future they could not say Freedom of Expression meaningfully existed in the United States. A respondent who rated Freedom of Expression at a Level 4 would see violence as having such severe impact that an effective loss of those freedoms was not only foreseeable, but imminent.

In addition, respondents were asked to provide their overall, holistic assessment of the impact of political violence on American democracy.¹⁰ Finally, the survey asked respondents to identify the aspect of political violence that most threatens democratic stability, and to offer additional insights or context.¹¹

The survey offers observers and policymakers several unique benefits. First, the survey aggregates

opinions from a *global panel of experts on political violence*. Respondents were recruited for their specific knowledge of violence and its impact on political life. While individual experts’ assessments vary and some may view the current situation with more or less alarm, the aggregation of their views offers a more reliable estimate of the current impact of violence on American democracy.

Second, by asking experts for their evaluation of political violence and its impact across *eight distinct pillars of democracy*, the survey captures a broad threat landscape. Policymakers and practitioners must prioritize their responses and the instances of violence dominating any given news cycle may not be those with the biggest impact on our democracy. The survey offers a means for identifying which elements of our democracy are under most acute pressure, at least according to the views of experts on political violence.

Finally, the survey accounts not only for acts of physical violence, but *asks experts to consider threats and harassment as well*. The chilling effects of such behaviors are significant, but are not captured by data collection efforts focused on violent events.¹² Pooling experts’ assessments offers one way to measure this type of impact, and, in future waves, to detect changes in expert perceptions.

⁹ Researchers define political violence in a number of ways, some more narrow than others. This definition follows that used by the [Alliance for Peacebuilding](#) and offers the utility of being comprehensive but concrete, remaining meaningful to academic experts on violence, but resonating with democracy practitioners.

¹⁰ This general assessment question was worded as “Thinking specifically about the effects of political violence—defined above to include physical harm, threats, and intimidation, to what extent does political violence currently impact [the overall functioning of American democracy?](#)”

¹¹ The pillars of democracy were adapted from the criteria utilized by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project — in their designation of countries as liberal democracies—and modified to apply specifically to the U.S. context. The five-point impact scale was adopted from the Authoritarian Threat Index developed by researchers at Authoritarian Warning Survey.

¹² Some surveys have begun assessing the impact that threats have on local officials. The Bridging Divides Initiative, Civic Pulse, the Anti-Defamation League, the Brennan Center for Justice, the National League of Cities, and the Prosecution Project are among those contributing to such efforts. More information is available at <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/UnderstandingThreats>.

<p>LEVEL 1</p> <p>Within range of a well-functioning democracy.</p>	<p>LEVEL 2</p> <p>Moderate violations atypical of a well-functioning democracy, but that don't yet threaten breakdown of this element of democracy.</p>	<p>LEVEL 3</p> <p>Violations that signal significant erosion of democracy quality in this area and warn of high potential for breakdown in future.</p>	<p>LEVEL 4</p> <p>Critical violations that seriously threaten this element of democracy's near-term survival.</p>	<p>LEVEL 5</p> <p>Violations severe enough to make this aspect of the system non-democratic.</p>
--	--	---	--	---

Importantly, what VDIT provides is an overall snapshot. The impacts of political violence in the United States vary widely by geography. The vast majority of those engaging in violent behavior and those targeted by them are operating locally, rather than at the level of national politics. Data on threats and harassment of local government officials in particular is being collected from nationally representative samples, or on a more localized basis in several areas.

These surveys provide a more nuanced source of information for specific localities or aspects of democratic practice than VDIT can provide. Rather, VDIT provides summary data points that can be used alongside other valuable data sources and expert analysis to provide a high-level view of conditions in the United States.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE: EXPERT SURVEYS

Expert surveys are a common tool to evaluate the quality or health of political institutions, particularly in the context of complex systems where objective, quantifiable criteria may either be hard to publicly observe directly or too costly to consistently measure. Though less precise than such direct observation, expert surveys capture the perspectives of individuals with the depth of knowledge and experience to account for nuance, context, and variation. By pooling the opinions of many knowledgeable individuals, expert surveys capture the average or most common evaluation among the population of individuals most likely to be positioned to offer an accurate assessment. In many cases, this approach sidesteps the risk of relying on the evaluation of one or two experts whose views may be outliers, compared to their peers.

Expert surveys also have limitations. If the experts who respond are making assessments on the same set of

limited or poor information (such as consistent biases in news reporting) or if the pool of experts has some collective bias about the institutions being examined, their evaluations may be a poor reflection of realities on the ground. Where evaluation would require knowledge of a very specific or narrow context, a wider pool of experts may have less accurate views than a single specialist with more granular knowledge.

VDIT capitalizes on the strengths of the methodology while mitigating some of these challenges by asking for general assessments and recruiting experts to the survey based on neutral criteria of publication records and institutional affiliation, rather than relying on specific networks or hyperspecialization. Having a pool of experts with diverse backgrounds allows us to ask for high-level views while reducing the risk of collective bias.

4 Results

In the first wave of data (collected in July 2023), 112 experts¹³ completed the survey and generally agreed that the current threat of political violence on democratic institutions indicates moderate violations atypical of a well-functioning democracy, though the impact is more serious in some pillars of democratic practice, particularly election administration and the protection of individual liberties.¹⁴

Figure 1 shows the average score across all respondents in each democratic pillar on the scale of one through five, while Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses across the five response levels for each pillar.

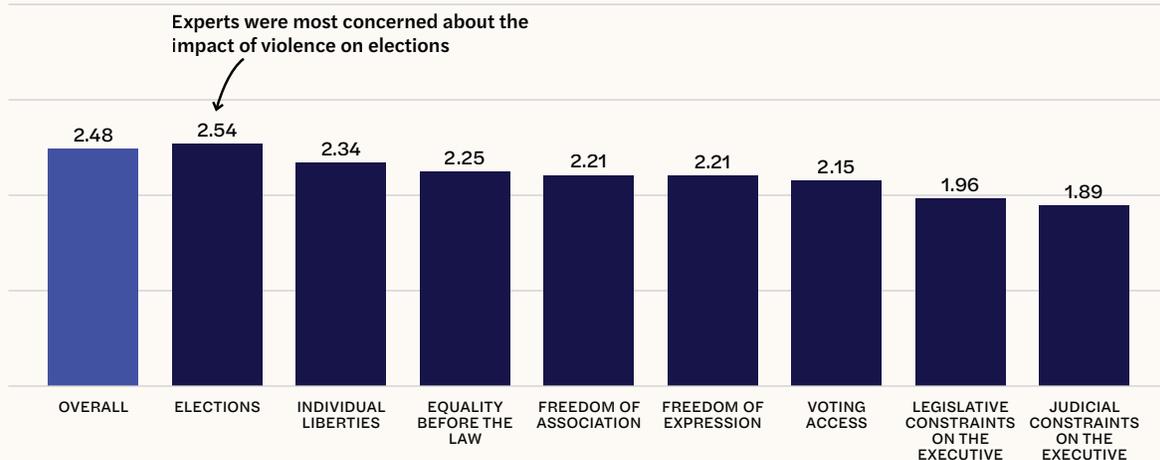
Overall, respondents' average assessments of the threat of political violence to each institution of democracy does not yet indicate a high potential for democratic breakdown (Level 3), but a significant number of experts express elevated concerns about most pillars.

Respondents' average overall assessment of political violence's impact on American democracy (2.48) was higher than their average assessment of all but one of the individual pillars — election administration.¹⁵ The “overall” score was statistically significantly higher than the perception of threats posed to all but two of the individual pillars: Elections and Individual Liberties.

FIGURE 1

IMPACT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ON EACH PILLAR OF DEMOCRACY

Each pillar score was calculated by taking the mean of experts' ratings from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest impact.



Note: The number of responses to each question ranged from n = 103 to n = 112.

¹³ Due to some expected noise in the contact information available, only 461 of our email invitations were opened (50 invitations failed to be delivered at all). Of those, 133 experts responded but only 112 completed the survey. Those who completed the survey represented a 15% response rate among the entire distribution list and a 25% response rate among those who opened the email. This is not a strong response rate, but for the first wave of the study it is within the bounds of reasonable expectation and comparable to response rates of expert surveys such as Bright Line Watch.

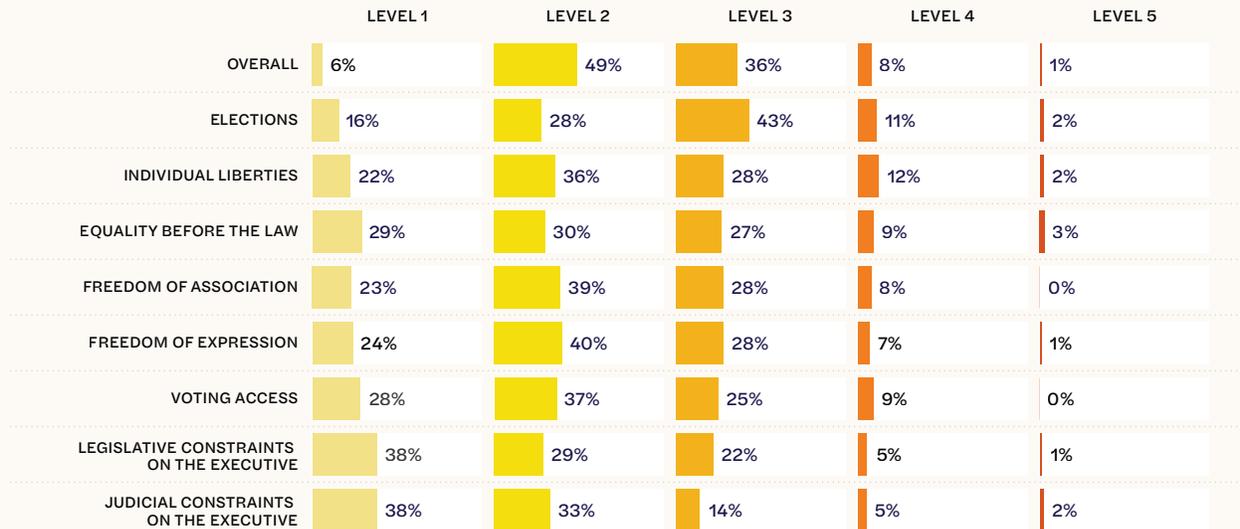
¹⁴ For the most part, experts based in the United States and experts based internationally did not differ significantly in their scores on the individual pillars or on their overall assessment of the impact that political violence is having on American democracy. The only exceptions were in their assessments of the impact on Judicial Constraints on the Executive, where international respondents' scores were statistically significantly higher, on average. Additional details are available in the methodological appendix to this report.

¹⁵ The pillar of lowest concern was the threat violence poses to Judicial (1.89) and Legislative (1.96) Constraints on the Executive. These scores were significantly lower than perceived threats toward Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association, Voting Access, Elections, Equality Before the Law, and Protection of Individual Liberties.

FIGURE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERT RESPONSES ACROSS DEMOCRACY PILLARS

Experts say political violence currently has a higher impact on elections than other aspects of democracy.



Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100% due to skipped and “Don’t know” responses
Chart: SNF Agora Institute and Protect Democracy • **Source:** Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker

FIGURE 3

IMPACT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ON ELECTIONS

The majority of experts assessed the impact of political violence on elections as level 3 or higher.



Note: 56% of experts believe that we are seeing an impact that is at least meaningful enough to signal significant erosion of electoral quality and a high potential for breakdown of election processes.

Chart: SNF Agora Institute and Protect Democracy • **Source:** Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker

For most individual pillars, roughly two-thirds of respondents saw the impact of political violence as being either negligible (Level 1) or atypical of a well-functioning democracy, but not threatening breakdown of that pillar (Level 2). As shown in Figure 3, many more expert respondents expressed elevated concern about political violence's impact on American elections, with 56% of respondents scoring the impact as Level 3 or higher, indicating significant erosion of democratic quality and a high risk of breakdown for electoral processes in the future.

Greatest Concerns About Political Violence

After rating the threat violence poses to each of the pillars of democratic practice, we asked the expert respondents to answer the following question:

“NOW THINKING ABOUT THE ASPECTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE THAT MOST THREATEN THE FUNCTIONING OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, PLEASE PROVIDE A WORD OR SHORT PHRASE TO IDENTIFY WHAT MOST CONCERNS YOU AT THIS MOMENT.”

Respondents' answers were “open-ended,” meaning they could write down anything they thought answered the question. Some representative quotations include:

- “[V]iolence that depresses electoral participation of specific groups”
- “[I]ntimidation and threat at the local level in school and other local issue politics”
- “1) Threats forcing out officials who need to administer elections fairly, 2) threats forcing out officials from other vital administrative roles, 3) threats and intimidation changing the behavior of elected & appointed officials”
- “The routine promotion of violent rhetoric & activity by public officials, including elected officials.”

- “Partisan violence against prominent individual legislators or SC [Supreme Court] justices”
- “Far-right militias, white supremacists, accelerationists”

TOP 5 CONCERNS

Respondents most frequently cited threats related to the following as their top concern of political violence's impact on American democracy:

- 1. Violence directed at the electoral process**
- 2. Right-wing, far-right, or white nationalist violence**
- 3. Escalating polarization and partisanship**
- 4. Violence against marginalized communities, particularly the LGBTQ+ community**
- 5. Elites encouraging, condoning, or inciting violence**

While responses ranged widely, certain clear themes emerged. The five most common areas of concern are listed in the box on page 13. Consistent with the quantitative assessments above, the most commonly-expressed concerns were about violence and threats related to the electoral process.

Right-wing violence was second among the most frequently identified concerns. The sample, however, was not exclusively focused on the political right. Many responses about experts' greatest concerns reflected no clear partisan valence and some did mention groups or incidents often associated with the political left.

What Type of Violence?

Finally, we asked respondents what kind of violence they were thinking about when they answered the earlier questions in the survey. We asked how much they were thinking about: (1) Physical Harm; (2) Direct Threats; or (3) Intimidation/Implicit Threats. Their answers ranged from 1-Not at all to 5-A great deal. Respondents rated each of these types of violence independently.

Respondents reported thinking about all three types of violence — **AT LEAST 90% REPORTED THINKING ABOUT EACH AT LEAST “A MODERATE AMOUNT.”**

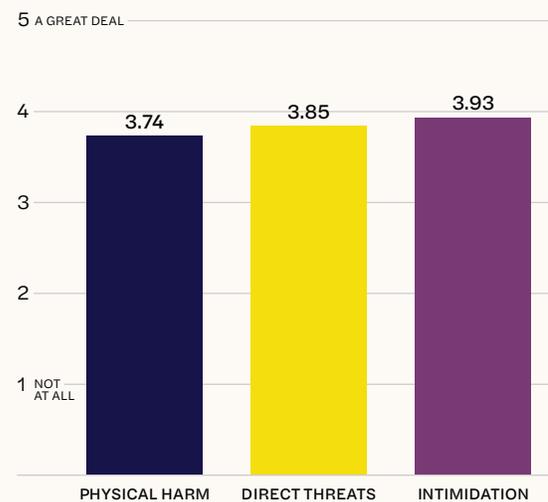
While the general definition of political violence provided to respondents during the survey included physical harm, threats, and intimidation, it did not direct respondents to weigh all types of behavior equally. Substantial variation in responses to this question suggests that — while most saw all three as being relevant — respondents did indeed vary in just how much they considered each type of violence as informing their assessments. Figure 4 shows the average scores for each type of violence. On average, respondents were thinking about intimidation

statistically significantly more than about physical harm (3.93 vs 3.74).

FIGURE 4

CONSIDERING ASPECTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Most respondents were thinking about physical harm, threats, and intimidation at least a moderate amount in making their impact assessments.



Note: Scores were calculated by taking the mean of experts' responses on a scale from 1 to 5. The number of respondents to each item ranged from n = 111 to n = 112.

Chart: SNF Agora Institute and Protect Democracy

Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT)

5 Conclusions

The findings offer cause for both concern and hope. The survey found that the most common view among respondents was that, overall, political violence is having an effect that is atypical of a well-functioning democracy, but that it is not currently generating a high risk of democratic breakdown. In the area of election processes, respondents were more concerned, seeing violence as causing serious erosion and raising a high risk of breakdown in our democratic election processes in the future — on our scale of one through five, more than half rated the impact of political violence at a Level 3 or higher. Finally, the experts who responded to our survey largely reported that physical harm, threats, and intimidation were all aspects of political violence relevant to its impact on U.S. democracy.

These results reflect serious concerns from experts, including areas in which emerging threats are having harmful effects on our democracy. But it also indicates that advocates and policymakers are appropriately focused on what violence experts see as the most at-risk aspects of our democratic practice — namely, election administration — and that violence has not yet degraded most components of our democracy. To put it simply, political violence is straining the fabric of our politics, but so far the system is largely resilient to its specific effects. While the pressures on our democratic institutions and practices are myriad, political violence specifically is not preventing most of them from functioning at this time. There is no guarantee that our democracy will be able to sustain that effort. Future waves of the survey will continue to monitor changes in that resilience.

At present, the first wave of data offers several key takeaways.

First, **elections remain the most notable flash point for political violence in the United States** — not just on Election Day, but throughout the full process of election administration. Survey results indicate that the risk of breakdown in our election process is high, and while some policymakers and advocates have taken initial steps to help ensure that elections are protected from attempts to violently disrupt their administration or outcomes, more responses are urgently needed.

Second, though elections are currently experiencing the most strain, **other pillars of democracy still face threats** that are not normal for a well-functioning democracy and that could further exacerbate pressures on elections themselves. Public officials, law enforcement, and civil society should take active steps to remain vigilant against threats to judicial independence, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech. Taking active measures to protect these pillars of our democracy and deter political violence is necessary to prevent further erosion and destabilization of the whole.

Finally, **threats and intimidation do damage to our democracy**, chilling political participation and targeting people whose work is essential to our institutions. We know, for example, that election workers are considering retiring at high rates.¹⁶ Worries about threats and harassment are high among local government officials, even those who do not themselves report being the victims of violent

¹⁶ Michael Beckel, Amelia Minkin, Amisa Ratliff, Ariana Rojas, Kathryn Thomas, and Adrien Van Voorhis. [“The High Cost of High Turnover: When local election officials leave their positions in record numbers, the costs to institutional knowledge and running elections are significant.”](#) *Issue One*, September 2023.

harm, threats, or harassment.¹⁷ Women may be less willing to serve in elected office in the first place, partly out of fear of such threats.¹⁸ While the trends in physical violence are [disturbing and impactful](#), they are not the only dimension of the problem here in the United States. Threats and intimidation need to be understood and addressed as part of the same problem.

VDIT provides a tool for prioritization and the results of the first wave of the survey indicate that experts who responded see political violence affecting our election process more than any other pillar of American democracy. These results reinforce the vital need for greater protections going into the 2024 election cycle. Responses will need to come from multiple sources. For example, law enforcement will need to [better engage and coordinate](#) with election administrators to ensure the safety of all parts of the election process. Federal and state lawmakers may need to provide more ways to [protect election workers](#) from threats and intimidation. Civil society organizations will likely need to sustain their efforts to combat political violence beyond any one election season.

For those working to strengthen U.S. democracy, political violence represents a complex and potentially existential threat to the system — one that is caused by the shortcomings of our politics, but that also has the capacity to accelerate a decline into authoritarianism. But resources are not infinite. As future waves of the survey provide additional data, civil society, policymakers, and law enforcement must continue to dynamically respond to the most impactful threats, while finding ways to ensure continued resilience in pillars of democratic practice that have not yet deteriorated in the face of violent harm, threats, and intimidation.

¹⁷ Civic Pulse and Bridging Divides Initiative, "[Threats and Harassment: The Cost of Local Government Leadership](#)," September 2023.

¹⁸ Rebekah Herrick, Sue Thomas, Heidi Gerbracht, and Emily Miota. 2022. "[Gender and Race Differences in Mayors' Experiences of Violence](#)." Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.



The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University is a multi-disciplinary academic and public forum dedicated to strengthening global democracy by improving and expanding civic engagement and inclusive dialogue, and by supporting inquiry that leads to real-world change.

Protect Democracy is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.