Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker: December 2023 Update

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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.

### Impact on Democracy

Distribution of expert ratings of the overall impact of violence

#### JUN–JUL 2023

- **LEVEL 1**: 6%  
- **LEVEL 2**: 49%  
- **LEVEL 3**: 36%  
- **LEVEL 4**: 8%  
- **LEVEL 5**: 1%

#### OCT–NOV 2023

- **LEVEL 1**: 7%  
- **LEVEL 2**: 41%  
- **LEVEL 3**: 41%  
- **LEVEL 4**: 10%  
- **LEVEL 5**: 1%

52% of experts rated the current overall impact of violence on U.S. democracy at a level 3 or higher, reflecting “significant erosion.”

### Impact on Elections

53% of experts place the impact of violence on elections at a level 3 or higher, at risk of future breakdown.

### Top Expert Concerns

- **Right-Wing/Far Right Violence**
- **Polarization**
- **Violence Directed at the Electoral Process**
- **Elected Officials Inciting and Condoning Violence**
- **Breakdown in Institutions and Social Norms**

### About the Experts

72 U.S. BASED

35 OUTSIDE U.S.

1 DIDN'T SAY

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.
Main Takeaways

- Concern about the overall impact of political violence on US democracy rose slightly between July and October, with respondents’ mean score rising slightly from 2.48 to 2.56.
- Among the eight pillars of democratic health tracked by VDIT, election processes remained the area of highest concern to experts.
- In evaluating the impact of political violence, respondents thought about intimidation and direct threats more than physical harm compared to the prior wave.
- Right-wing and far-right violence ranked highest among experts’ concern about political violence in the United States. Other top concerns included polarization, violence directed at the electoral process, elected officials inciting or condoning violence, and the breakdown of institutions and social norms.

Overall Impact

In its second edition, VDIT indicates that the impact of political violence on American democracy remained largely consistent since the initial data was collected in July. Respondents’ concerns about the impact of political violence on the health of U.S. democracy were slightly higher than in the first wave of data collection — with the mean score increasing from 2.48 to 2.56. There were still very few experts who viewed the impact as falling in the highest levels, and in both waves, over 85% of respondents expressed views that they did not believe a breakdown in democracy from political violence to be imminent. The increase in overall impact score contrasted with experts’ evaluation of political violence’s impact on individual pillars of democratic practice, where six out of eight pillars saw a slight decline in mean scores.

Impact Across Democratic Pillars

Among the eight pillars of democratic practice that VDIT tracks, election processes again remained the area of highest concern to experts, with a mean score of 2.51 and a median rating of level 3. The distribution of expert responses changed very little from the first wave of the tracker, with 53% of respondents rating the impact of violence at a level 3 or higher for elections. This means that experts who responded to our survey still believe the impact of political violence on election processes is equivalent to significant erosion of democratic quality, with a high risk of breakdown at some point in the future.

Respondents were also thinking more about intimidation than other aspects of political violence. In evaluating the impact of political violence on the pillars of democracy, 89% of respondents indicated that they were thinking about intimidation or indirect threats at least “a moderate amount,” compared to 87% for direct threats and 79% for physical harm.
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.

DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERT RESPONSES ACROSS DEMOCRACY PILLARS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elections</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Liberties</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of Expression</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of Association</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Access</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality Before the Law</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Constraints on the Executive</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial Constraints on the Executive</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The number of responses to each question ranged from n = 103 to n = 108.
Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, October - November 2023

Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100% due to skipped and "Don't know" responses.
Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT), October - November 2023
Respondents’ evaluation of most other pillars was largely consistent, with six of the eight seeing minor drops in mean responses, one pillar (voting access) seeing no change, and one (freedom of expression) seeing a slight increase (0.03) in mean score. The one exception to this overall pattern of consistency was the pillar concerning equality before the law, where average concerns were 0.1 lower than in Wave 1.

**Top 5 Areas of Concern**

When asked to name the aspect of political violence in the United States that concerns them the most, experts who responded to Wave 2 were concerned with a number of issues. The top 5 areas of concern reflect the most frequent types of responses, and include: right-wing/far-right violence; polarization; violence directed at the electoral process; elected officials inciting and condoning violence; and breakdown in Institutions and social norms. Other concerns, such as threats against public officials and misinformation were also mentioned frequently, but not as often as those in this list.

**Responses to Current Events**

It also appears that respondents were cognizant of current events in the news during the survey period. While those events shaped their perspectives, they did not necessarily drive their impact assessments. For example:

- Several respondents pointed to news of the intimidation of lawmakers during the contest for the Speaker of the House of Representatives in their qualitative responses. That may help to explain the elevated emphasis on intimidation in the expert responses.
- The conflict in Gaza was on some respondents’ minds. Some qualitative responses reflected concerns about human rights norms eroding, while others noted concerns about a rise in anti-Semitism or Islamophobia in the United States as a reaction to that conflict. However, these were not dominant in respondents’ qualitative answers and we saw no major increase in scores on freedom of expression or individual liberties.

Beyond the headlines, VDIT’s responses across the first two waves are consistent with event-count data for the period. ACLED, a leading database of violent events, indicates that there were rises in the number of riots in both periods preceding VDIT data collection (in June and October) but that otherwise the incidence of political violence was fairly steady throughout Q3 and the first half of Q4 of 2023. The consistency in VDIT’s measures corresponds to consistency in violence levels in the United States during this period.³

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