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Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker: December 2023 Update

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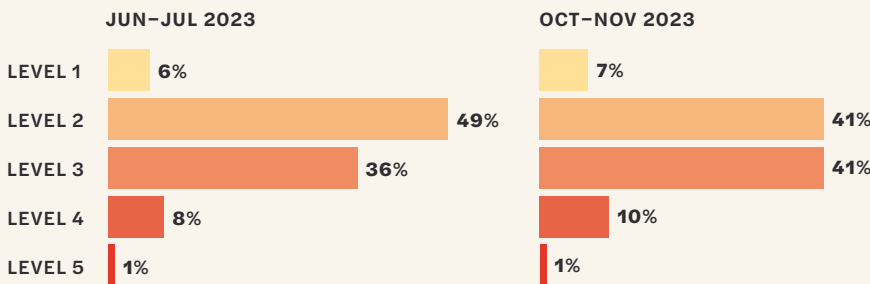


December 2023 Update at a Glance

- IMPACT 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

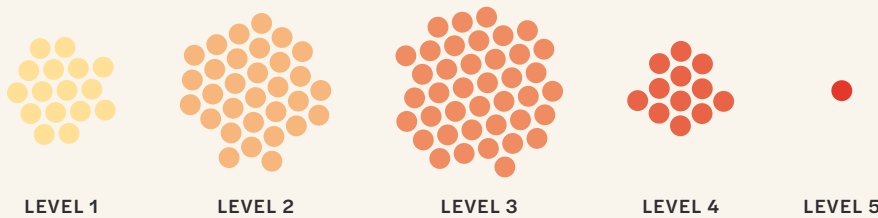
Impact on Democracy

Distribution of expert ratings of the overall impact of violence



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

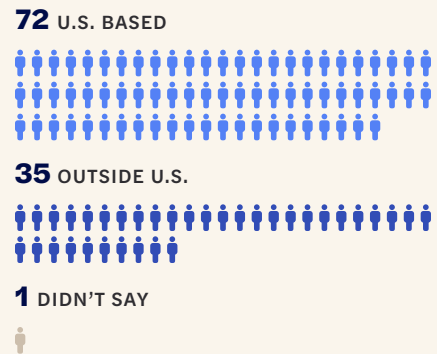


53% of experts place the impact of violence on elections at a level 3 or higher, at risk of future breakdown.

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



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.¹ 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 2.56.² 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.

Eight Pillars of Democracy

- Freedom of Expression
- Freedom of Association
- Voting Access
- Election Processes
- Equality Before the Law
- Protection of Individual Liberties
- Judicial Constraints on the Executive
- Legislative Constraints on the Executive

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 Across Democratic Pillars

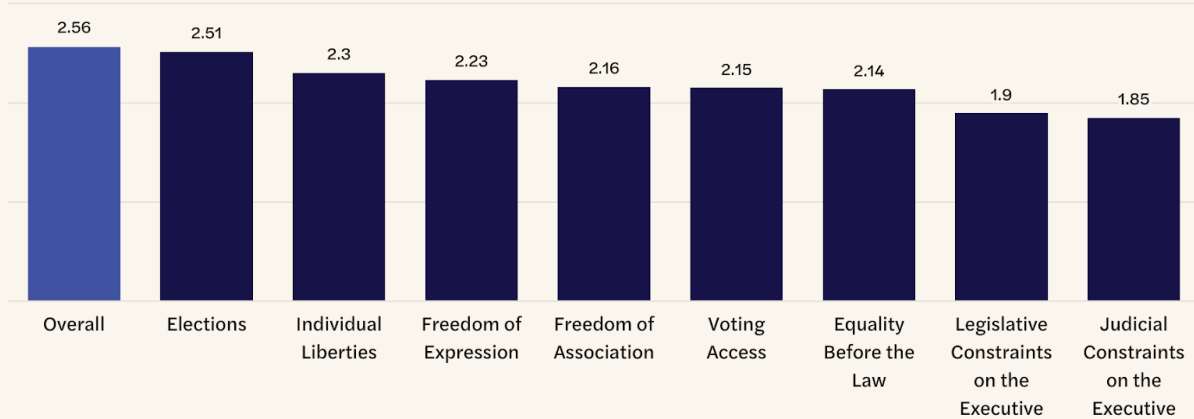
Among the eight pillars of democratic practice that VDIT tracks, election processes again remained the area of highest concern to experts, with a mean score of 2.51 and a median rating of level 3. The distribution of expert responses changed very little from the first wave of the tracker, with 53% of 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.

¹ Wave 2 of the survey was sent to 843 individual experts between October 24 and November 6, 2023, including 187 who were newly qualified into the panel based on new publications between January and June of 2023. Of these, 478 opened the e-mail and 125 completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 14.9%, and a response rate of 26.2% among those who opened the invitation e-mail. This represents a slight drop in the response rate from Wave 1 of VDIT.

² The sample sizes in Wave 1 and Wave 2 are not large enough to detect statistical significance in this difference.

IMPACT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ON EACH PILLAR OF DEMOCRACY

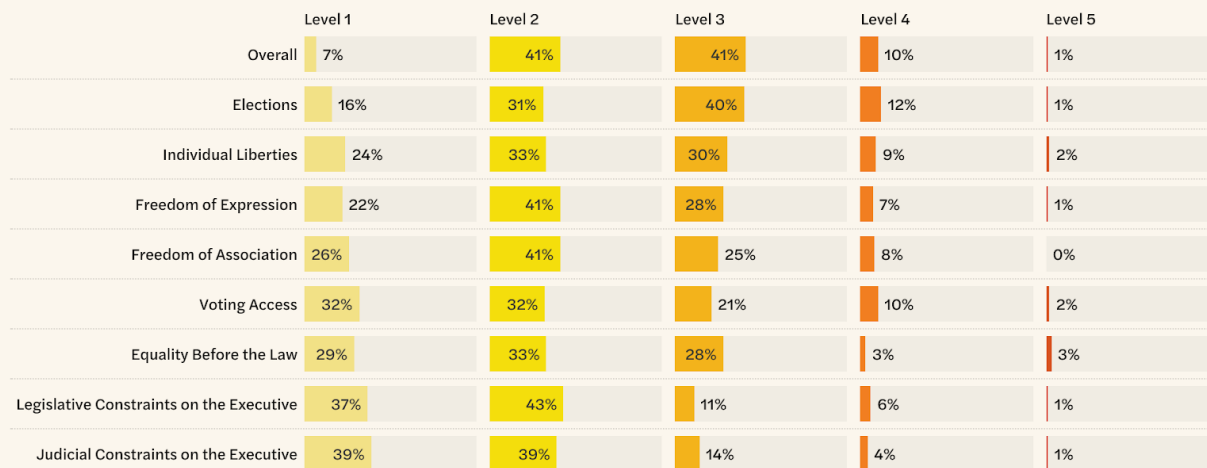
Each pillar score was calculated by taking the mean of experts' ratings from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest impact.



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



DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERT RESPONSES ACROSS DEMOCRACY PILLARS



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

³ 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.