

SEPTEMBER 2024

Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker September 2024 Update

For the full methodology and description, see the [VDIT website](#)

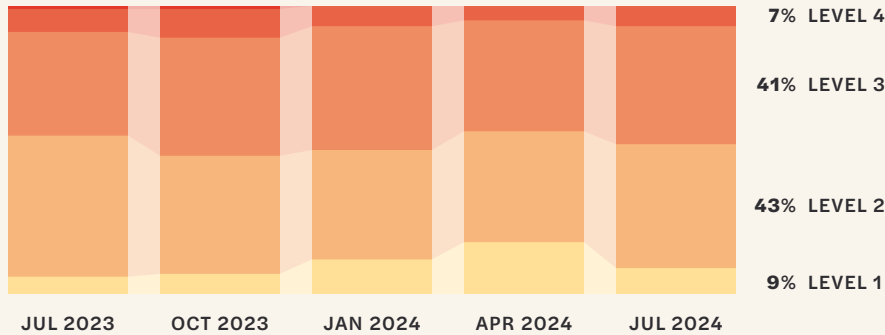
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September 2024 Update at a Glance

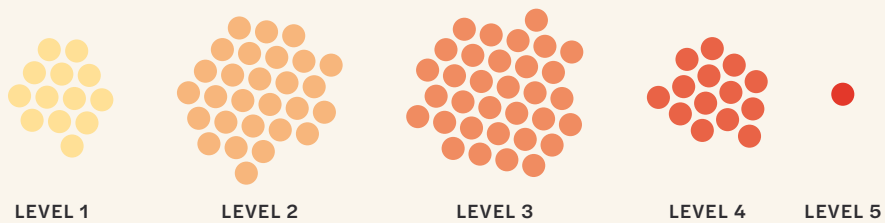
- IMPACT LEVELS**
- 1** Well-functioning democracy
 - 2** Atypical effects, but no imminent threat of breakdown
 - 3** Significant erosion of democratic quality, risk of future breakdown
 - 4** Critical effects, risk of imminent breakdown
 - 5** System is non-democratic

Impact on Democracy Distribution of expert ratings of the overall impact of violence



48% 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

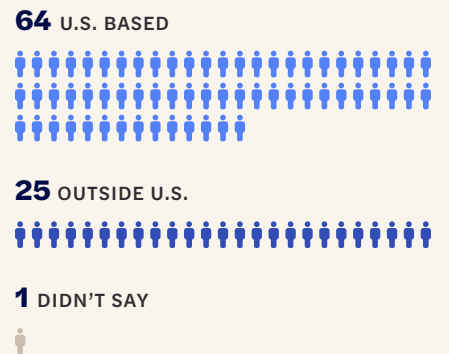


54% of experts place the impact of violence on **elections** at a level 3 or higher, at risk of future breakdown.

Top Expert Concerns

- Breakdown of institutions and norms, including the rule of law
- Extremist violence, including from militias and the far right
- Polarization
- Threats to the electoral process, including voter intimidation
- Threats to political opposition and peaceful transfer of power

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 U.S. democracy was consistent with prior waves, rising slightly between April and July from a score of 2.31 to 2.46.¹
- Among the eight pillars of democratic health tracked by VDIIT, election processes remain the area of highest concern to experts, with an average score of 2.57 and 54% of experts rating the impact as level 3 (erosion high enough to indicate a heightened risk of democratic breakdown in the future) or higher. The pillar that saw the greatest change was judicial constraints, which saw an increase from 1.89 to 2.15. Concern about the impact of political violence on equality before the law also increased slightly. In contrast, concerns about freedom of expression and freedom of association dropped slightly from 2024 Q2 results.²
- In evaluating the impact of political violence, respondents were again thinking most about the effects of intimidation, with 69% reporting that they were thinking about it “a lot” or “a great deal” in making their impact assessments.
- Respondents identified the Breakdown of Institutions and Social Norms, Extremist Violence, Polarization, Threats Directed at the Electoral Process, and Threats to Political Opposition as their top concerns.
- The attempted assassination of former President Donald Trump had a meaningful impact on experts’ assessment of the overall risks of political violence to U.S. democracy, but did not significantly alter their assessment of its impact on any specific pillar of democratic practice.

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

Overall Impact

The fifth wave of VDIIT indicated that experts’ concerns about the impact of political violence on U.S. democracy continue to remain relatively steady.³ After dropping the prior quarter to its lowest level since the survey began, in July the average assessment rose slightly to 2.46, with 52% of respondents assessing the impact as falling at a Level 2 or below and 48% of respondents rating the impact as a Level 3 or 4.⁴ Only 7% of respondents rated the impact at a Level 4 and none assessed the overall impact as reaching a Level 5. This once again indicates that while about 4 in 10 experts expressed concern about the possibility of democratic breakdown due to political violence, very few viewed it as imminent.

Respondents also continued to think more about intimidation than other aspects of political violence. (Figure 3) In evaluating the impact of political violence on the pillars of democracy, 69% of respondents indicated that they were thinking about intimidation or indirect threats “a lot” or “a great deal,” compared to 58% thinking about direct threats and 54% about physical harm. As noted later in the report, the percentage of respondents reporting that they were thinking about physical violence increased slightly in the period immediately following the assassination attempt against former President Donald Trump.

¹ The change was not statistically significant at conventional levels.

² With the exception of the change in judicial constraints, these changes were not statistically significant at conventional levels.

³ Wave 5 of the survey was sent to 878 individual experts between July 10 and August 12, 2024, including 59 who were newly qualified into the panel based on new publications between January 2024 and March 2024. Of these, 636 opened the e-mail and 98 completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 11% and a response rate of 15% among those who opened the invitation email.

⁴ In addition to asking about the impact of political violence on eight pillars of democratic practice, the VDIIT survey asks respondents for a separate assessment of the “overall impact” on U.S. democracy. These numbers are reported from that question and the change from the prior quarter was not statistically significant.

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. The mean impact score for election processes was 2.57 (up from 2.42 in April but on par with January's 2.55), and the median rating rose back to Level 3, where it had been in prior waves of the survey. Consistent with most prior quarters, 54% of respondents rated the impact of political violence at a Level 3 or higher for elections.

Several other pillars saw increases in average scores between April and July. Largest among these was the increase in political violence's impact on judicial constraints (up 0.26 to a mean score of 2.15), followed by a more modest increase of 0.11 in the average score for equality before the law (increasing to 2.23 in July). Two pillars saw slight declines in scores between April and July: the average impact score for freedom of expression dropped 0.12 to 2.19, while the average score for freedom of association dropped 0.19 to 1.99.⁵

FIGURE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERT RESPONSES ACROSS DEMOCRACY PILLARS

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Overall	9%	43%	41%	7%	0%
Elections	14%	31%	37%	16%	1%
Equality Before the Law	23%	47%	14%	9%	4%
Judicial Constraints on the Executive	28%	39%	19%	7%	3%
Freedom of Expression	20%	60%	11%	9%	0%
Voting Access	28%	38%	22%	7%	0%
Legislative Constraints on the Executive	28%	42%	21%	6%	0%
Individual Liberties	26%	52%	13%	7%	1%
Freedom of Association	32%	40%	24%	3%	0%

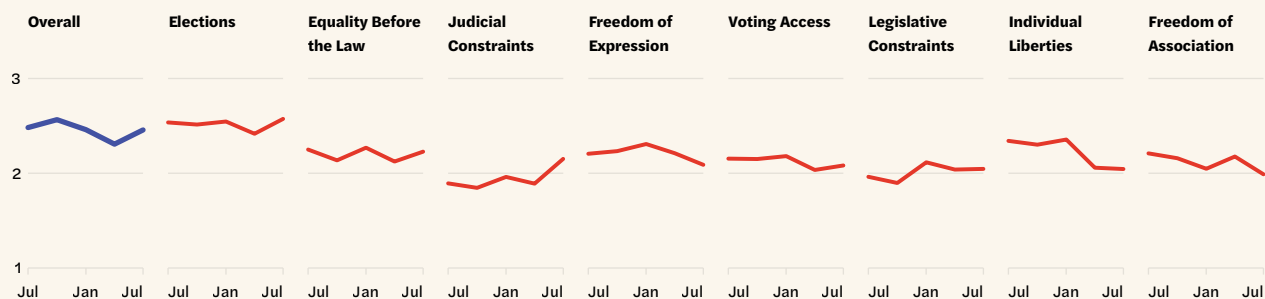
Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100% due to skipped and "Don't know" responses.

Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, July 2024



FIGURE 2

MEAN EXPERT SCORE FROM JULY 2023 TO JULY 2024



Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, July 2023 - July 2024



⁵ Of these changes, however, only the change in judicial constraints was statistically significant at conventional levels. This suggests that responses continue to be generally consistent across waves.

Top 5 Concerns

- Extremist Violence, Including from Militias and the Far Right
- Breakdown in Institutions and Social Norms, Including the Rule of Law
- Polarization
- Threats to the Electoral Process, Including Voter Intimidation
- Threats to Political Opposition in the U.S., Including the Peaceful Transfer of Power

Top 5 Areas of Concern

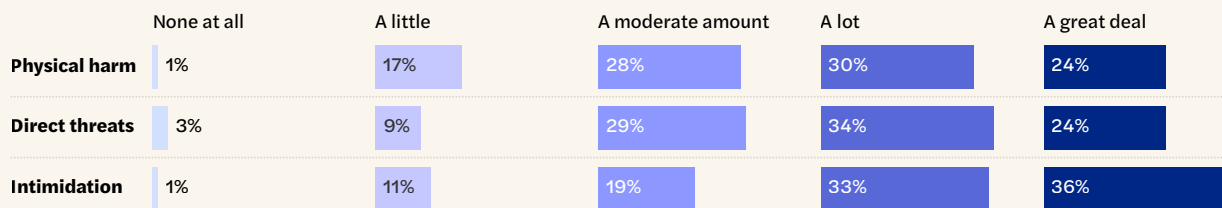
As with prior editions of VDIT, respondents were asked to identify the aspect of political violence in the United States that concerns them the most. The responses to this wave of the survey were similar to prior waves in expressing a mix of concerns. Some respondents noted the impact of broad forces such as polarization and the breakdown of social norms, while others expressed more specific concerns, particularly related to the assassination attempt on former President Trump. Further concerns were centered around the impact of violence on certain pillars of democratic practice.

Experts most frequently expressed concerns that could be categorized in one of two areas: (1) extremist violence, including militias and far right violence and (2) the breakdown of institutions and social norms, including those related to the rule of law. They once again identified polarization and threats related to our electoral processes as being among the top concerns. Threats to political opposition (including the transfer of power) took an additional spot on the “Top 5” concerns list.

FIGURE 3

CONSIDERING ASPECTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

"In answering the questions above, how much were you thinking about each of the following aspects of political violence?"



Note: The number of responses to each question was n = 90.

Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, July 2024

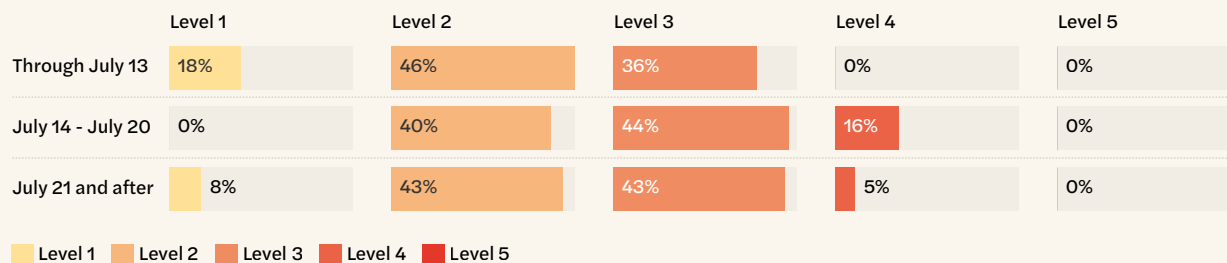


Responding to the Attempted Assassination of Donald Trump

Data collection for this wave of VDIT began on July 10. On July 13th, a gunman attempted to shoot former President and then-presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania. One rally attendee was killed and others, including former President Trump, were injured in the attack. 31% of responses were collected prior to this event, while 69% were collected following the attack.

FIGURE 4

DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERTS' OVERALL SCORES BEFORE AND AFTER TRUMP ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT



Note: sample sizes were n = 28, n = 25, and n = 37 in each respective time period.

Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, July 2024

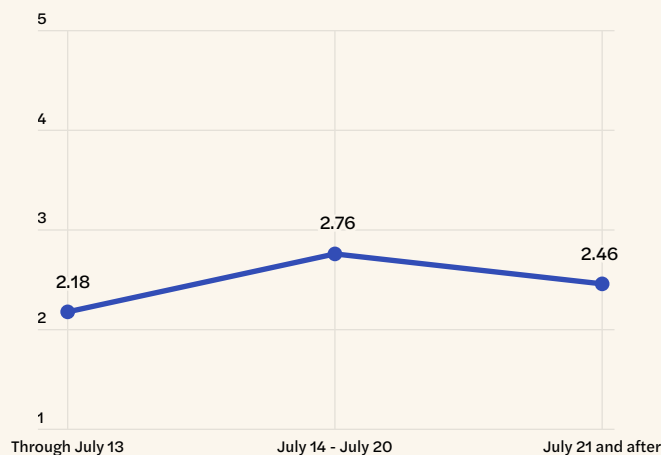


Analysis of time trends in responses indicate that there was no significant difference across respondents' average scores for any of the eight democratic pillars in the VDIT survey. However, the average response to the question about how respondents rate the overall impact of political violence on U.S. democracy did increase following the attack, and was particularly pronounced in the week following the event.⁶ Figures 4 and 5 show these changes over time.

In addition to the timing of these responses, the other responses indicate that these changes were likely related to the attack. None of the qualitative responses submitted through July 13 included the word "assassination." In the week that followed, 28% of experts provided qualitative responses that mentioned it. The post-event period also included an increase in the proportion of respondents who reported thinking about physical harm "a lot" or "a great deal."⁷

FIGURE 5

MEAN OVERALL SCORE BEFORE AND AFTER TRUMP ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT



Note: sample sizes were n = 28, n = 25, and n = 37 in each respective time period.

Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, July 2024

6 Approximately 28% of responses were collected in the week following the attack on July 13. The increase in average response levels for overall impact was statistically significant at conventional levels.

7 42.86% of those who responded to the survey prior to the attack on July 13 indicated that they were thinking about physical harm "a lot" or "a great deal" in providing their impact scores, compared to 72% of respondents in the week following the attack and 51.36% of respondents who completed the survey on or after July 21. However, the increases were not statistically significant at conventional levels.