



# **Extremism and Political Violence:**

What to know this election year, and what you can do

**Civic**Genius

## Introduction

Extremism and political violence in the United States are on the rise. As we move further into 2024, many people – not just experts but everyday Americans – are committed to ensuring that our elections are safe and fair. In this briefing, we offer a look at what we know about extremism and political violence, and how individuals can contribute to a healthy political climate in 2024.

Across the country, nearly one in three election officials [report](#) being harassed, abused, or threatened because of their job. One in five worry about being physically assaulted on the job in future elections. Election officials have reported a litany of abuses. One, terrified by a pick-up truck following him aggressively as he drove around collecting ballots from drop boxes in Oregon, called 911 four times in one day. In Virginia, an official received threats against her family, while the dog of another elsewhere in the South was poisoned and barely survived.

A Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [bulletin](#) from earlier this year said that extremists in the U.S. "likely remain emboldened" since the last presidential election. "Threat actors intent on harming Americans through the use of violence may become more aggressive as Election Day approaches and may seek to engage in or provoke violence at voting locations, government facilities, public meetings, ballot drop box locations, or private-sector vendor locations that support elections," the bulletin warns.

"We can also expect the political discourse associated with this election will become even more polarized, more angry and more divisive," John Cohen, a former intelligence chief at DHS told reporters. "And all those factors together is what has law enforcement concerned."

This briefing is designed to help individuals – private citizens, elected officials, community leaders, and others – understand the current nature of extremism and political violence, and leverage personal relationships in their communities to de-escalate potential extremist actions.

## Extremism

In this briefing, we [define](#) extremism as the extent to which regular citizens are polarized into, and strongly identify with, generic left- or right-wing ideological outlooks on society. Extremism comes in many flavors. In some cases, it can bring about positive change; throughout history, we can recall movements that were viewed by many as extreme, like women's suffrage and the Civil Rights Movement.

Here, we are concerned with extremism that negatively impacts our democracy.

Researchers have identified four interrelated psychological features that characterize political extremism: psychological distress, cognitive simplicity, overconfidence, intolerance. While these are not the only contributing features, they are well-studied and help us build an understanding of how extremism develops and presents.

- 1) Psychological Distress: One expert [describes](#) psychological distress as a sense of meaninglessness that stems from anxious uncertainty, and finds that people sometimes [compensate](#) for these feelings with strong ideological convictions. Experiencing or perceiving a loss of personal significance [increases extreme beliefs](#) among people on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

Nearly everyone in the U.S. can remember feeling anxious at one time or another. During the pandemic, for example, Americans felt fear of getting sick, missing out on school and family, or losing income. Others may relate to a feeling of insignificance and lack of belonging in their community. Of course, these emotions are not unusual, and the millions of Americans who experience them are not turning toward violent extremism. Still, research finds that psychological distress increases extremist beliefs and support for radical movements.

- 2) Cognitive Simplicity: “Feelings of distress prompt a desire for clarity, and extremist belief systems provide meaning to a complex social environment through a set of straightforward assumptions that make the world more comprehensible,” finds a 2006 [paper](#). Trygve Olson, a political consultant who has trained pro-democracy activists across Eastern Europe and Central Asia, explains that when a person is in psychological distress, they sometimes soothe that distress with a simplistic explanation – whether it’s a simple explanation for something complex or a complex explanation for something simple.
- 3) Overconfidence: A person might lock into a simplistic explanation to the point of overconfidence. When overconfidence is holding together the alleviation of distress, it can become all-encompassing. Political extremists become more confident about their judgment on topics that they over-simplify, and believe their views are superior on a variety of public policy issues. In fact, this might even go beyond policy. [One study](#) found that extremists were more confident in their answers than moderates when asked to estimate things like the distance between San Francisco and New York City or the number of babies born each day in the U.S.

[Another study](#) looked at how people in the Netherlands thought the government should address the country’s refugee crisis. It found that left-wing extremists, right-wing extremists, and moderates all had about the same degree of knowledge on the topic, but the extremists were more certain they were correct.

- 4) Intolerance: Once overconfidence takes hold, people can become psychologically extremist, a state of anger and intolerance. Cognitive simplicity and overconfidence work together in such a way that extremists see their views as “moral absolutes.” When a person believes that their worldview is morally superior, they begin to view other worldviews as morally inferior and [become intolerant](#) of other values and beliefs. They become [less interested](#) in compromise and more willing to achieve their ideological

goals through violence. From here, we see that extremists seek out only people and discourse that reinforce and validate their beliefs.

We know that extremists [seek out others](#) who share their views, and see that both information and misinformation, including conspiracy theories, spread in online echo chambers of like-minded people.

Online channels – including both obvious places, like social media sites, and less obvious places, like gaming platforms – that elevate extremist rhetoric are numerous, and that rhetoric can start to seem normal to people who may not have sought it out explicitly. “No one radicalizes in a vacuum,” Michael Jensen, who runs the University of Maryland’s Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States project, told [Reuters](#). “They do it within social networks.”

## Political Violence

Political violence in the U.S. has increased significantly in the past five years, according to a number of sources, including the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Rachel Kleinfeld, senior fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, defines political violence as “physical harm or intimidation that affects who benefits from or can participate fully in political, economic, or sociocultural life.” She [testified](#) before U.S. House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the United States Capitol that incidents of threat, harassment, and violence were on the rise:

- In 2016, the Capitol Police investigated 902 threats against members of Congress. In 2021, they investigated 9,600.
- Armed participants at protests grew by 47 percent in the 11 weeks between the election and the inauguration, compared to the 11 weeks before the election. Organized paramilitary groups grew by 96 percent.
- [In 2021](#), white supremacists held 108 public events, more than double the year before and the most recorded in the previous five years.

Not only is political violence increasing, but it is changing in shape. While extremist groups like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Boogaloo Bois have garnered broad media attention in recent years, [Kleinfeld says](#) this overshadows a deeper trend: the “ungrouping” of political violence. In other words, most political violence in the U.S. is committed by people who do not belong to a formal organization.

Instead, Kleinfeld writes, “ideas that were once confined to fringe groups now appear in the mainstream media. White-supremacist ideas, militia fashion, and conspiracy theories spread via gaming websites, YouTube channels, and blogs, while a slippery language of memes, slang, and jokes blurs the line between posturing and provoking violence, normalizing radical

ideologies and activities.”

With violent political rhetoric less confined to organized groups and in wide circulation online, any number of events can light a match that sparks real-world violence. Millions of Americans are primed to support or condone violence, whether stoked by partisan actors or spontaneous events (like a pandemic).

Evidence suggests that the profile of extremists has also shifted. The Chicago Project on Security and Threats [analyzed](#) 824 cases of people arrested in connection with the January 6 Capitol riots. It also compared the demographics, socioeconomic traits, and militant group affiliations of these arrestees with people arrested in earlier cases of political violence. As of June 2022, only 14 percent of those arrestees were supporters of groups like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters. Most of them – 86 percent – had no affiliation with militant organizations. Their average age was 40. Thirty-six percent owned businesses or held white collar jobs, and only six percent were unemployed.

Right-wing extremists from earlier eras looked different. The study found that 61 percent were younger than 35, a quarter were unemployed, and very few worked in white collar jobs. Many more were members of white nationalist gangs, militias, or other extremist groups. Support among Americans for political violence has also increased. Between 2017 and 2020, Democrats and Republicans justified violence at roughly the same levels as one another, with Democrats slightly more willing to condone violence. (There was one [notable spike](#) in Republican support for violence was visible in November 2019, shortly before Trump’s first impeachment.)

Separate polling found lower but still comparable levels: only four percent of Democrats and three percent of Republicans believed in October 2020 that attacks on their political opponents would be justified if their party leader alleged the election was stolen, while six percent of Democrats and four percent of Republicans believed property damage to be acceptable in such a case.

Between 2021 and 2023, an increase becomes evident. In an [October 2023 survey](#) by States United Democracy Center, 23 percent of Americans agreed that “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” including 33 percent of Republicans, 22 percent of independents, and 13 percent of Democrats. This is up from 2021, when 15 percent of Americans were open to supporting violence, including 28 percent Republicans, 13 percent of Democrats, and 7 percent of independents.

While right wing extremism is more prevalent in the U.S. right now, the possibility for extremism and political violence are by no means confined to one area of the political spectrum. [In the 1970s](#), for example, left-wing extremism was the most common ideological motivation for terrorist attacks, constituting 68 percent of all attacks. The next largest category was nationalist/separatist extremism (39 percent of attacks), and these two groups had significant overlap with one another.

## Conspiracy theories

A conspiracy theory is “an explanation of past, present, or future events or circumstances that cites as the primary cause a small group of powerful people working in secret, for their own benefit, against the common good, and in a way that undermines bedrock ground rules against the widespread use of force and fraud,” write Joseph Uscinski and Adam Enders, authors of a [book on conspiracy theories](#).

Research shows that people with extreme views believe conspiracy theories more strongly than moderates (learn more [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#)) and [feel less satisfied](#) with democracy in general.

Evidence does not show that belief in conspiracy theories is increasing. One team of researchers looked at [37 conspiracy theories](#) and found that they tend to lose believers over time and that new conspiracy theories aren't more popular than those in the past. For example, the notion that 5G technology caused COVID-19, that Bill Gates orchestrated a “pandemic,” and that drinking bleach could cure the virus all decreased from 2020 to 2021. The share of people believing that global warming is a hoax decreased from 37 percent in 2013 to 19 percent in 2021, while enthusiasm for the Qanon movement remained stable throughout the 2020 election season.

While belief in conspiracy theories may not be increasing, it is nonetheless prevalent. The same study found that in 2021, 44 percent of Americans agreed that a “deep state” operates secretly within the U.S. government, 48 percent agreed that Jeffrey Epstein was murdered to cover up his criminal activities, and 34 percent agreed that Hollywood and government elites are running a child sex trafficking racket. An [October 2022 poll](#) found that more than one-third of Americans are sympathetic to the “Great Replacement” theory.

Conspiracy theories are also not harmless. Believers are less likely to vote but more likely to [commit everyday crimes](#) and [violence](#) against a person in a position of power. “Once people are convinced of [conspiracy theories], there is no need to pay allegiance to any form of social contract, as codified in laws and regulations or implicitly agreed on in forms of trust in epistemic authorities like quality media or university scientists,” write the authors of a [2018 paper](#) on how conspiracy thinking impacts trust in existing knowledge.

There is [some evidence](#) that the relationship between conspiracy thinking and violence is stronger among people who say they have lower self-control and less respect for the law, and that the relationship between anger and violence is stronger for people with higher paranoia. Overall, experts who study extremism say psychiatric problems alone [rarely induce](#) political violence.

## In Perspective

The [Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker](#) evaluates the impact that political violence is having on American democracy. In 2023, researchers surveyed 112 experts on political violence from around the world and asked them to rate the impact of violence on American democracy using a scale of one to five, with one representing a well-functioning democracy and five representing a non-democratic system. Most put the impact at a two or three on the scale:

- Close to half of the experts, 49 percent, rated the impact at two, meaning “atypical effects, but no imminent threat of breakdown.”
- More than a third, 36 percent, put the impact at three on the scale, meaning “significant erosion of democratic quality, risk of future breakdown.”

Six percent rated the effect at one (well-functioning democracy) and one percent rated it a five (non-democratic system).

Violence against the electoral process drew the most anxiety among these experts. Election-related violence was their top concern, followed by right-wing/far-right/white nationalist violence; escalating polarization and partisanship; violence against marginalized communities; and elites encouraging, condoning, or inciting violence. More than half of the experts (56 percent) rated the impact of political violence on elections at a three on the five-point scale.

A report by the [States United Democracy Center](#) cautions that surveys may overstate the extent to which Americans are willing to accept political violence, finding that some people who respond to the surveys are expressing their broad dissatisfaction with politics, while others are simply not paying much attention when they answer. The report found that surveys may overstate support for violence by as much as 43 percent on average. When people respond to surveys, they may answer differently when questions name specific actions (murder or physical attacks), for example, rather than general language about violence.

## What You Can Do

Experts have made a number of recommendations for dealing with extremism. [Over Zero](#), a global organization dedicated to preventing identity-based violence, has recommendations for how philanthropy should address the threat of political violence. [States United Democracy Center](#) has recommendations for elected officials, researchers, and journalists.

On an individual level, many Americans are seeking guidance on how to interact productively with friends, family, and others in their communities who appear to be going down a path to extremism. Trygve Olson, the political consultant who has trained pro-democracy activists around the world, offers a pragmatic way to approach someone who is hanging on to an idea or theory that’s tipping into extremism. In short, he says, “Extremism buys in bulk. You fix it one by one.”

First, keep a few things in mind:

**ONE:** Contradicting an extremist won't change their mind. When you correct them, you're attacking something that's deeply important psychologically. (In fact, it will usually just prompt them to enlighten you with *their* facts.)

**TWO:** Facts only matter if you help the person accept those facts

**THREE:** You can't shame someone out of their beliefs.

**FOUR:** Cognitive dissonance chips away at extreme beliefs.

To engage the person effectively, try this strategy:

**ONE:** Plan ahead if you can. If you know you're going to wind up in one of those conversations at your niece's birthday party next weekend, do some thinking ahead of time.

**TWO:** Once you're in the conversation, listen hard and think about how this person sees themselves.

**THREE:** Pay attention to the examples they use to reinforce their overconfidence, and take the opportunity to inject new facts into their thinking – without demeaning them.

**FOUR:** Ask questions that focus on incongruence. Look for the differences between how this person thinks of themselves and what they're advocating.

**FIVE:** Don't give up. Over time, you can help this person find the answers themselves in the incongruence. You're not battling them with truth; you're creating opportunities for them to walk away from extremism on their own.

Remember, this strategy takes time. You probably won't make much progress in one or two conversations. Maintain a good relationship and challenge yourself to keep engaging and listening.

### **About Civic Genius**

We're working to rebuild American civic culture through everyday opportunities to learn and engage. With programs designed to meet you wherever you are in your civic engagement, then build on the common ground that already exists across personal backgrounds and political affiliations, Civic Genius is working to get our democratic experiment back on track. Learn more at [ourcivicgenius.org](http://ourcivicgenius.org).

*This publication was made possible with the generous support of the [A-Mark Foundation](#).*