

SPECIAL REPORT: PART 1 OF 2

# U.S. Domestic Political Stability and Security

## A Strategic Estimate for 2024 and Beyond





# U.S. Domestic Political Stability and Security

## A Strategic Estimate for 2024 and Beyond

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### Contents

Executive Summary . . . . .	3	Theme 2: Sociopolitical Trends and Events . . . . .	19
Key Judgments . . . . .	4	Political Polarization . . . . .	19
Introduction and Overview . . . . .	8	Divergent Responses to Social Wedge Issues . . . . .	20
Current Environmental Dynamics, Actors, and External Shocks . . . . .	9	Discontent Over Law Enforcement Practices and Powers . . . . .	23
Theme 1: Challenges to Democratic Governance . . . . .	10	Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation . . . . .	26
Theme 2: Sociopolitical Trends and Events . . . . .	10	2024 Presidential Election . . . . .	31
Theme 3: Sociopolitical Movements and Ideologies . . . . .	10	Conclusion . . . . .	32
Theme 4: External Shocks . . . . .	10	Biographies . . . . .	32
Theme 1 – Threats to Democratic Governance . . . . .	11	Endnotes . . . . .	32
Creeping Illiberalism and Authoritarianism . . . . .	11		
Electoral Interference . . . . .	12		
Rising Threats Toward Lawmakers and Legislative Facilities . . . . .	14		
Extremist Insider Threat . . . . .	16		

*The content and views expressed in this special report are those of the authors and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.*

COVER: Far-right extremists and anti-fascists argue on Aug. 8, 2021, in Portland, Oregon. The two groups clashed without a police response. (Nathan Howard / Getty Images)

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## Executive Summary

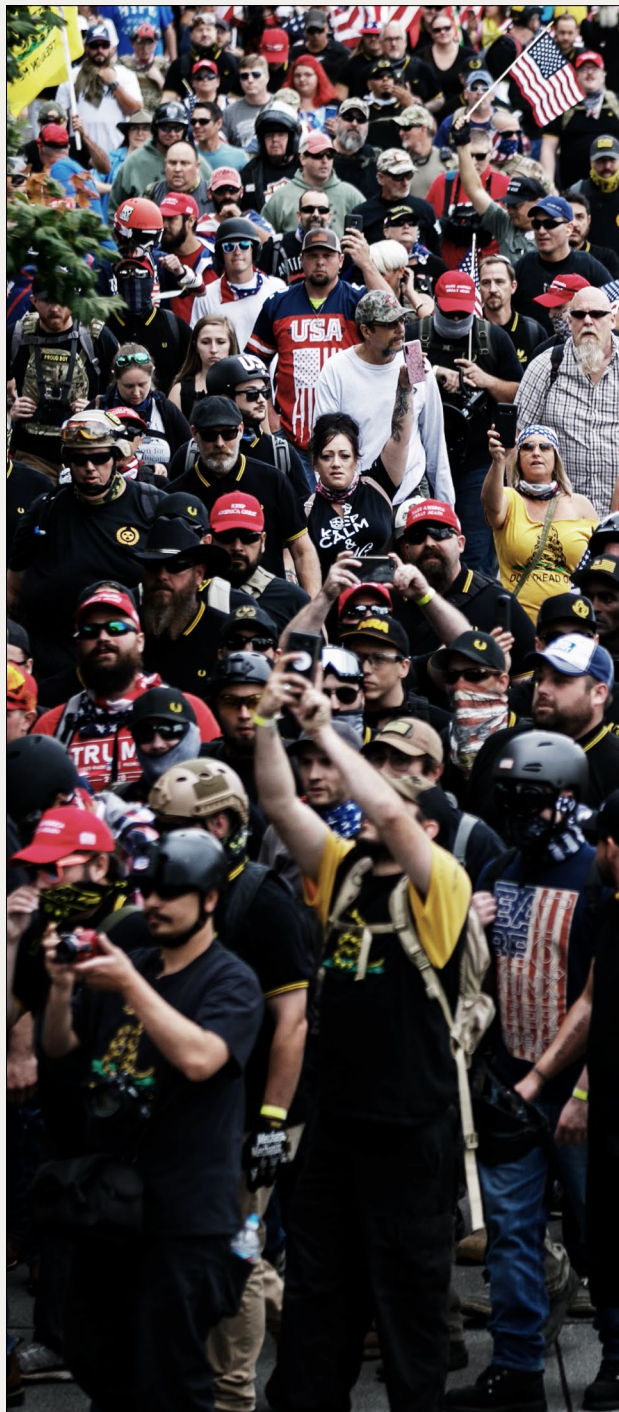
In April 2009, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a report accurately forecasting the resurgence of violent far-right extremist activity during the Obama administration.<sup>1</sup>

This two-part analysis expands upon that report, covering both ends of the conventional left-right political spectrum and including violent threats and nonviolent political threats to U.S. democratic norms, institutions, and procedural foundations. Although it maintains a future-oriented outlook,<sup>2</sup> this publication takes a generally short-term, 12-month focus. It does not offer policy recommendations because its scope is assessment and forecasting.

The four overarching themes contributing to the U.S. domestic political and security environment are:

1. **Challenges to democratic governance**
2. **Sociopolitical trends and events**
3. **Sociopolitical movements and ideologies**
4. **External shocks, or “wild card” variables**

This publication’s central conclusion – derived from its analysis of environmental dynamics and actor behaviors – is that the United States is at a heightened state of vulnerability due to erosion of its democratic foundations as well as greater likelihood of political violence.



Hundreds of members of far-right groups march during the “End Domestic Terrorism” rally on Aug. 17, 2019 in Portland, Oregon. (John Rudoff / AFP via Getty Images)



## Key Judgments

Additional key judgments, flowing from this central conclusion, summarize the analysis and findings of this futures assessment:

- **Of the two political milieus, this analysis assesses the biggest threat to democratic governance comes from the far right.** This is due to the steady infiltration of far-right beliefs – including explicit and coded antisemitism, racism, religious nationalism, and xenophobia/nativism – and actors into mainstream right-wing political discourse and political machinery.
- **The mainstreaming of far-right ideas and narratives has also provided permission structures that have inspired individuals into extreme acts of violence, including the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection.**
- **Far-left actors pose a smaller, but nontrivial threat to liberal democratic norms and governance.** Compared with their far-right counterparts, they have had far less influence on policy and lawmaking. Their involvement in nonstate violence is also quantitatively and qualitatively not commensurate with their far-right counterparts.
- **Regardless of this year's presidential electoral outcome, increased mobilization by extremist actors, including ones seeking to enact violence, is expected.**
- **Electoral interference is expected to manifest in one of at least one of four ways:** mis/disinformation influencing voter behavior, including turnout; election deniers within local and state election offices (effectively an insider threat); harassment and threats to election officials and election offices; and frivolous administrative, legislative, and legal actions to suppress voter access.
- **The threat of election interference overwhelmingly emanates from far-right actors.** In particular are those who believe the false idea that Donald Trump is the real winner of the 2020 elections, not Joseph Biden.
- **Lawmakers and legislative bodies across the country face substantial harassment and threats.** The risk of harassment, threats, and violence is especially elevated at local and state levels, due to lower levels of physical security, greater accessibility, and their attractiveness as politically symbolic targets. The greatest risks will be to state legislatures, particularly ones that allow firearms on the premises.
- **While members of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Capitol complex continue to be attractive targets, the chance that another Jan. 6-style attack could be successfully staged there is judged to be low.** This is due to greater intelligence awareness of threats as well as enhanced physical security in and around the premises.
- **Outside of malicious electoral officials, the most devastating potential insider threat to governing bodies and the voting process are far-right sheriffs, influenced by so-called "Constitutional Sheriff" ideology and election denialism.** This judgment is based on their openly stated willingness to effectively interfere in election processes, as well as their access and proximity to critical voting infrastructure. Moreover, because many sheriff's departments engage in policing duties, the presence of extremist insiders endangers organizational reputation, as well as the fair, impartial, and effective provision of public safety.
- **Far-right extremists within non-sheriff police departments and military services also pose substantial insider threats.** While malicious actors within these entities



threaten public safety and national security, they do not present potential harm to democratic procedural foundations the way far-right sheriffs do.

- **Already high levels of political polarization will deepen over the next 12 months.**
- **Deepening political polarization is predicted to evolve in two ways: between outgroups (right-wing and left-wing actors mobilizing against each other) and within left-wing and right-wing milieus.** Growing discontent over Biden's policies in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict has led to significant rifts on the wider political left, including cases of harassment, threats, and violence in the most extreme cases. Among right-wing actors, candidates and political figures who are perceived to be too "moderate" or compromising on key issues of interest are expected to be targeted with harassment, threats, vandalism, and violence in the most extreme cases.
- **Actors on the wider political left and political right, including those on their fringes, are divided by several social wedge issues.** For those on the left, key issues include the growing gap between rich and poor, climate change, gender/reproductive rights, police reform, racial disparities in socioeconomic outcomes, and perceived Palestinian genocide. For those on the right, key issues include claims of systematic electoral fraud, tightening border security, opposition to "critical race theory" (CRT) curricula in K-12 schools and universities, the teaching of LGBTQ+ content in K-12 schools, abortion, and workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies.
- **Both far-left and far-right actors are also motivated by the desire to mobilize against each other.** This includes both rhetoric and real-world activities that often involve

competing political assemblies, threats, and street violence.

- **Discontent directed at law enforcement practices and powers is a significant wedge issue that has grown over at least the past 10 years.** For actors on the right, including the far-right, moral outrage has been largely expressed at federal law enforcement for investigations into alleged crimes committed by Trump. For actors on the left, including the far left, moral outrage has been largely expressed at state and local police agencies over concerns about excessive and lethal force, particularly against members of racial/ethnic minority communities.
- **A subset of far-right and far-left actors have demonstrated a willingness to engage in homicidal action against police and other law enforcement officials.** While most far-left violence has typically been directed at property rather than people, a consistent exception is fatal targeting of police officers. Far-right actors, as of late, have threatened and violently targeted agents perceived to be carrying out political persecution against Trump. Recent legal developments, such as Trump's conviction in a New York State court, suggest target sets will expand to the state level in certain jurisdictions.
- **The proliferation of false information and conspiracy theories are playing important roles in both mainstream and extremist discourse.** Contrary to popular belief, the main effect of this proliferation is reinforcing existing beliefs and mobilizing individuals rather than persuading nonbelievers. Three conspiracy theories, all on the wider political right, are judged to be the most influential over the next 12 months: "Stop the Steal" (election denialism), "Great Replacement" (leftists and others allowing mass migration to engineer a political takeover of America), and QAnon (the U.S. government is



secretly controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles).

- **The far left does not have any salient conspiracy theories commensurate with the scale, volume of content, and level of mainstream support as found on the far right.** However, factors such as targeting by hostile foreign states, the current Israel-Hamas conflict, and the existence of largely unregulated platforms like TikTok present potential, but hitherto unrealized, vectors for mis/disinformation on the wider political left.
- **This analysis judges domestic far-right actors, particularly those motivated by election denialist beliefs, to be the most active and potentially damaging actors weaponizing false information against America, rather than state actors and far-leftists.** This is due to the political influence of Trump, as well as election denialist supporters with access to critical voting infrastructure.
- **Despite alarm surrounding synthetically produced audiovisual content using artificial intelligence (AI), called “deepfakes,” their use is likely to be limited to highly targeted mis/disinformation campaigns.** “Cheapfakes,” which do not involve the use of AI, are more likely to be used over the next 12 months because they are easier to produce and can be just as deceptively persuasive as deepfakes.
- **Hostile foreign states like Russia and China will engage in disinformation campaigns with intent to influence the 2024 election outcome.** They are judged to likely favor Trump’s candidacy given their geopolitical interest in areas such as Ukraine and Taiwan and will direct their influence operation campaigns accordingly.
- **The 2024 election season will exacerbate challenges posed by political polarization, divergent responses to social wedge issues,**

**and the presence of conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation in the public square.**

Competition motivates politicians, including leading presidential candidates, to engage in bombastic rhetoric that focuses less on policy and more on scoring political points. Thus, social tensions are expected to be inflamed for at least the next 12 months.

- **Trump and the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement’s influence in political discourse and policymaking present a significant challenge to democratic governance.** Whether intentional or not, Trump’s rhetoric significantly facilitated the introduction of far-right ideas into wider mainstream conservatism. He and his associated movement symbolize the transformation of large segments of mainstream conservatism into right-wing populism with strong illiberal and authoritarian undercurrents.
- **Trump’s potential legal and political outcomes affect not only the political landscape, but also public safety.** Any legal outcomes that effectively suppress Trump’s ability to run for office are potential triggers for domestic terrorist acts. Further, if Trump is reelected, more fear, anger, and elation will motivate both far-left and far-right domestic violent extremists to engage in continued violent mobilization and countermobilization into 2028.
- **Religious actors will play a highly influential role in the next 12 months.** Christian nationalists constitute a sizeable part of the wider political right’s base and larger American electorate. Although mostly driven by Whites, Christian nationalism also has a sizeable racial/ethnic minority component that will be central to the MAGA movement’s public framing and outreach to minority communities. Christian nationalism also can mobilize individuals into violence.



- **Although given comparatively less attention, left-wing religious actors also play influential roles in U.S. politics.** Their influence is currently not at the same level on the wider political left as Christian nationalists are on the wider political right. However, religious actors are expected to gain influence within the wider political left over the next 12 months due to their ability to mobilize diverse communities and serve as a counternarrative to the religious appeals made by Christian nationalists.
- **Issues of gender and sexuality have also become politically salient in at least the past seven years and mobilized millions of Americans, including those on its political fringes.** These issues include support for or opposition to “Critical Race Theory” in K-12 schools, DEI in the workplace, and access to abortion.
- **The heated rhetoric surrounding gender and sexuality, including demonization and dehumanization of women and LGBTQ+ minorities, will fuel armed mobilization, harassment, threats, and violence, particularly on the far right.** In reaction, far-leftists are expected to continue doxxing, counterprotesting, and armed countermobilizations.
- **While the Israel-Hamas war has motivated actors across the political spectrum, far-left actors are most energized and mobilized by the conflict.** In some more extreme cases, it has also led to cases of harassment, vandalism, threats, and acts of violence directed at a variety of targets, including elected officials.
- **The greatest threats that actors across the ideological spectrum pose to people are directed at Jews and individuals who are – or perceived to be – of Middle Eastern background or Muslim.** Hate crimes and other acts of political violence are expected to continue rising as long as the armed conflict in Gaza continues.
- **The war in Ukraine, meanwhile, has mobilized segments of the violent far right.** While the threat of U.S. citizens with far-right beliefs participating in the conflict, then returning to the United States and carrying out attacks has not yet materialized, there is some evidence to suggest that far-right extremists are attempting to learn from lethal innovations developed on the battlefield.
- **3D printing will impact public safety over the 12 months, particularly as a way for far-right extremists to manufacture firearms and firearm parts.** In general, the manufacturing of 3D-printed weapons is favored by far-right extremists, but there is some anecdotal evidence that far-leftists are also starting to embrace this technology.
- **Domestic extremists have slowly adopted UAS (uncrewed air system) technology and used it in limited circumstances.** In the short term, drones will most likely be employed for surveillance and propaganda dissemination purposes. However, it is more likely to influence other aspects of operational tradecraft in the long term.
- **AI has many potential malicious uses for extremist actors.** The two most likely uses over the next 12 months are scaling up disruption campaigns by far-right election denialists and the rapid dissemination of propaganda and disinformation online.



U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy snaps a photo from a balcony of the U.S. Capitol overlooking the areas where an insurrectionist mob attempting to disrupt the 2020 election process clashed with law enforcement on Jan. 6, 2021. (Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)



## Introduction and Overview

On April 7, 2009, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released an intelligence assessment of domestic violent extremism (DVE) titled, “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment.”<sup>3</sup> It accurately forecasted the resurgence of violent far-right extremist activity at the beginning of the Obama administration. Among other things, it noted that the unprecedented election of the country’s first Black president coupled with a severe economic downturn linked to the

2008 housing bubble collapse in the U.S., among a host of other factors, would lead to an unprecedented rise in violent far-right extremism. Fifteen years later, several of the same recruitment and radicalization factors persist, while many new factors and facilitators have emerged to make the DVE threat much more dynamic, diverse, and dangerous.

This analysis extends and expands upon the 2009 report. It spans both ends of the conventional left-right political spectrum instead of focusing on just one side. Although maintaining a future-oriented outlook like other analytic forecasts,<sup>4</sup> this publication takes a generally short-term, 12-month

focus. This is largely because this is a forecast before, rather than after, a major national election, which is a significant variable affecting present and future domestic actor behaviors. Although dedicating significant attention to the risk of violence and violent political actors, this analysis has a much broader analytic aperture that also assesses nonviolent political threats to American democratic norms, institutions, and procedural foundations.

In terms of this analysis, the “far left” refers to actors who hold beliefs that advocate for social egalitarianism but are otherwise hostile to the procedural and/or social norms of liberal democracy.





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‘ The central conclusion – derived from analysis of environmental dynamics and actor behaviors – is that the United States is at a heightened state of vulnerability due to erosion of its democratic foundations as well as a greater likelihood of political violence. ’

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In other words, they display illiberal and/or authoritarian beliefs or behaviors. The “far right” refers to actors who believe social inequality is not only inevitable or desirable but also forms the basis of an exclusionary nationalism that is hostile to the procedural and/or social norms of liberal democracy. Like their far-left counterparts, they, too, display illiberal and/or authoritarian beliefs or behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

This report is scaffolded by the identification of the variables contributing to the domestic political and security environment in the United States. To that end, the authors identified 13 such forces and factors and organized them into four overarching themes, integrating a wide range of variables into a coherent analysis and forecast.

The central conclusion – derived from analysis of environmental dynamics and actor behaviors – is that the United States is at a heightened state of vulnerability due to erosion of its democratic foundations as well as a greater likelihood of political violence.

It would be an exaggeration to say that U.S. democracy is in danger of dying out under certain conditions and electoral outcomes. However, illiberal backsliding and creeping

authoritarianism are realistic outcomes, and to some extent, have been occurring for decades. These concerns have been heightened by, among other things, ever widening political polarization as well as the return of Donald Trump, whose rhetoric has grown increasingly authoritarian, illiberal, and conspiracist since he left office in 2021, as a presidential candidate. Trump’s presence on the national stage exemplifies a broader phenomenon of once-fringe far-right views increasingly permeating wider mainstream right-wing political discourse.

Although not commensurate in terms of scale, this phenomenon is mirrored by a small but growing discourse on the wider political left, advanced by some far leftists, that demonizes perceived enemies and often glorifies violence against them. Nevertheless, compared to their far-right counterparts, far leftists, especially ones who advocate for or execute acts of violence, do not benefit from nearly the same level of legitimacy among the wider political left.

Regarding political violence, in the 15 years since the landmark assessment, the U.S. is still confronting many of the same forces and factors as it did in 2009. The primary DVE threat in

the U.S. since then has been, and continues to emanate from, the far right. Domestically, far-right extremist violence has now outpaced Islamist extremist violence,<sup>6</sup> which researchers and analysts had considered the most prominent ideologically-motivated threat actor category since 9/11.<sup>7</sup> Another key difference between 2009 and now is that since 2016, violent far-left actors collectively appear reinvigorated and potentially transitioning into another significant DVE threat. While not qualitatively or quantitatively commensurate to violence from the far right, its growing presence within the domestic violent threat landscape cannot be ignored, due to embryonic signs of growing lethality outside of fatal attacks on police.<sup>8</sup> The dominant far-right and emergent violent far-left threats not only create problems for public safety and national security, but also symbiotically interact to create a compound threat that will likely extend into 2025 and beyond.

### **Current Environmental Dynamics, Actors, and External Shocks**

This analysis identified 13 variables contributing to today’s domestic extremist landscape – broadly divided into two ideological categories, the far left and the far right – and grouped them into



four overarching themes. These themes were then articulated into central analytic questions and their component variables articulated into analytic sub-questions, all listed below:

### Theme 1: Challenges to Democratic Governance

**Analytic question #1:** What are the key issues confronting the United States’ ability to function collectively and effectively as a liberal democracy at federal, state, and local levels?

- **Creeping illiberalism and authoritarianism:** How are nonviolent and violent threats to American liberal democracy manifesting?
- **Election Interference:** What are the threat vectors and vulnerabilities malicious actors are likely to exploit to disrupt and/or manipulate electoral processes? Who are these malicious actors?
- **Rising Threats Toward Elected Officials and Legislative Institutions:** Beyond anecdotes, how significant are trends of harassment, threats, and acts of violence against elected officials and legislative institutions? What/who are the most likely targets? What are the potential threat vectors?
- **Extremist Insider Threats:** Who are the key ideological actors in positions of public trust that pose significant threats to American democracy and national security/public safety? What positions of public trust are likely to be affected by insider threats?

### Theme 2: Sociopolitical Trends and Events

**Analytic question #2:** What are the underlying issues and factors inspiring and enabling political mobilization, including violence, across the ideological spectrum?

- **Political Polarization:** How will sociopolitical divisions affect current threats to American democracy and attempts to execute politically motivated acts of violence?
- **Divergent Responses to Social Wedge Issues:** What are the key social and political issues energizing and catalyzing actor mobilization across the political spectrum?
- **Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation:** What are the key narratives, based on false information, energizing actors across the political spectrum? What are the likely impacts of conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation on democratic foundations and actor mobilization into violence? Who are the likely targets of false information?
- **2024 Presidential Election:** What are the likely political and security impacts of the 2024 national election – particularly, how are the rhetoric and policy positions of presidential candidates impacting actor mobilization? What are the likely impacts on American democratic foundations?

### Theme 3: Sociopolitical Movements and Ideologies

**Analytic question #3:** Who are the key actors mobilizing around sociopolitical trends and what are their beliefs/ideologies?

- **Trump and the MAGA Movement:** What are the likely political and security impacts of Trump’s, and the wider MAGA movement’s, presence in public political life over the next 12 months? How will Election Day outcomes shape those impacts?
- **Religious Activism:** How is religion in American public life impacting the U.S. domestic political and security environment? Who are the key faith-based actors mobilizing on the wider political right and political left? What are their likely political and security impacts over the next 12 months?
- **Gender- and Sexuality-Centered Actors:** How are ongoing public debates associated with gender and sexuality likely to impact U.S. domestic politics and security over the next 12 months? Who are the key actors and movements most influenced to mobilize, nonviolently and violently, by ongoing debates associated with gender and sexuality?

### Theme 4: External Shocks

**Analytic question #4:** What are the main disruptive “wild card” variables, outside of domestic sociopolitical trends, likely to



impact the U.S. domestic extremist landscape in the next 12 months?

- **Foreign Conflicts:** How are armed conflicts in Ukraine and Israel-Gaza likely to influence political mobilization, both nonviolent and violent, in the United States over the next 12 months?
- **Emerging Disruptive Technologies:** What key emerging disruptive technologies around the world could significantly shape America's domestic political and security environment over the next 12 months? What are their likely impacts?

This Intelligence Brief is the first installment of a two-part series. Part One focuses on Themes 1 and 2, describing and assessing the threats to democratic governance and the underlying sociopolitical trends associated with them. Part Two, to be published next week, focuses on Themes 3 and 4, describing and assessing the behaviors of key actors, as well as the current and potential impacts of external shocks from foreign conflicts and emerging disruptive technologies – namely, artificial intelligence, additive manufacturing, and uncrewed aerial systems.

## Theme 1 – Challenges to Democratic Governance

### Creeping Illiberalism and Authoritarianism

There has been a growing expression of illiberal and authoritarian beliefs and

manifestation of behaviors from both ends of the political spectrum.

This analysis concludes that, of the two political milieus, the far right poses the biggest threat to democratic governance in the United States. This is due to the steady infiltration of far-right beliefs – including explicit and coded antisemitism, racism, religious nationalism, and xenophobia/nativism – and actors into mainstream right-wing political discourse and political machinery. This includes media outlets, research and advocacy groups, and political figures, most notably Donald Trump.

However, beyond Trump and his political allies at the federal level, media outlets and watchdog groups have noted the growing number of extremists elected to office at state and local levels.<sup>9</sup> These individuals are an important part of the injection of far-right extremist beliefs into mainstream discourse that captured a sizeable electoral base, translating into millions of votes in local, state, and national elections. This has resulted in, among other things, proposed legislation and policy changes that are antithetical to liberal democracy, such as policy and legislative proposals openly seeking to change institutionalized election processes and voting procedures, state-level laws tasking local and state policing agencies with enforcing federal immigration, curtailing minority rights and women's rights, making radical revisions to school curriculum, supporting book bans, and stoking fears about Muslims and Islam.<sup>10</sup>

It also provided inspiration and permission structures for nonstate actors to engage in threats or actual violence against racial, religious, and sexual minorities, political opponents, and elected officials. This extends to attacks against state legislatures in 2020 and the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol complex. This analysis therefore assesses far-right U.S. domestic nonstate actors to be the most significant ideologically-motivated violent threat to American homeland security.

Far-left actors pose a smaller but nontrivial threat to liberal democratic norms and governance, largely in the form of increasingly normalized antisemitism, street violence against perceived enemies, disruptive “direct action” tactics on college campuses and elsewhere that sometimes turn physically threatening or violent, and increasing threats and acts of violence toward local, state, and federal lawmakers. Compared to their far-right counterparts, they have had far less influence on policy and lawmaking.

If Trump is reelected president of the United States, threats to democracy and growing risks to and threats against democratic norms and procedures are expected to increase under his administration. As a candidate, Trump has intensified his firebrand rhetoric, which has also included explicit appeals to nativism/xenophobia,<sup>11</sup> authoritarianism,<sup>12</sup> and dehumanization and violence against political opponents.<sup>13</sup>

In 2016, there were notable pockets of opposition and dissent among



mainstream right-wing actors and within Trump's administration,<sup>14</sup> but the institutional landscape has significantly changed in 2024. Conservative flagship entities<sup>15</sup> have openly thrown their weight behind him. Since the 2024 Republican primaries, Trump loyalists have been installed within the Republican National Committee to further cement his influence within the GOP institutional landscape,<sup>16</sup> though this may come at the cost of efficiently running party machinery.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding extremist political violence, continued growth in extremist recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization on both sides of the political spectrum is expected. An increase in violent attacks by both far-right and far-left extremists can be expected as they participate in a mutually reinforcing cycle of demonization and violence against each other. Trump will continue to be a central figure and force among DVEs on both sides of the political spectrum.<sup>18</sup> For violent far-right extremists, he will be a figurehead who frequently provides social capital and legitimacy to their ideas. For violent far-leftists, he is a lightning rod who personifies a perceived far-right authoritarian encroachment on democracy and threat to vulnerable minority communities that must be opposed by any means necessary.

Potential legal action including arrests, incarceration, civil lawsuit outcomes, and attempts to suppress Trump's ability to run for office are potential catalysts for far-right violence as they appear to have been in the past. Further, if Trump is reelected, more fear

and anger, as well as elation, will motivate DVEs on the far left and far right, respectively, into continued violent mobilization and countermobilization until at least 2028.

In contrast, a Democratic win for the presidency will only reinforce further far-right extremist recruitment, radicalization, and violent mobilization. This will be driven by their fears and anger related to issues supporters of the far-right perceive as an erosion of their constitutional rights and way of life, such as potential gun legislation, attempted expansion of minority rights, continued challenges related to border security and immigration, and proposed expansion of government assistance programs and regulation. Far-left extremist actors will also likely remain highly active and recruit and radicalize new supporters, if for no other reason than positioning themselves as a countermobilizing force against far-right extremists. In other words, neither likely outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election is expected to stem the heightened activity of domestic extremists, including those willing to use violence, for the next four years or more.

### **Electoral Interference**

Based on past behaviors of malicious actors, acts of interference in the upcoming 2024 electoral process are likely to manifest in at least four ways.<sup>19</sup> The first is through misinformation and disinformation spread online and through robocalls, mailers, or statements from political civic

figures via mass media outlets. The content of mis/disinformation has varied in the past; this analysis assesses with high confidence that malicious actors looking to undermine trust in the integrity of the electoral process and its outcomes are likely to claim that mass voter fraud has occurred. Although previous narratives have also attempted to attack the credibility of the voting machines, the \$787.5 million legal settlement awarded to Dominion Voting Systems in a defamation case will likely deter future attempts to employ this tactic. There will likely be cases in which political candidates will refuse to concede the results of elections, typically based on false claims about voter fraud and ballot tampering. Given the enduring pervasiveness of election denialism, this tactic is especially likely to be employed in closely contested elections.<sup>20</sup>

A second likely method is to place election deniers in positions of power, access, and close physical proximity to voting systems and voting booths. Malicious actors seeking to challenge the integrity of the electoral process have run for local and state offices overseeing elections, and some have refused to certify election results. Another tactic is for sympathetic election officials to illegally provide access to voting systems by outside "auditors" seeking to copy voter data for the purpose of contesting the election results – an insider threat. Although this is probably a rare type of threat, it has potentially devastating consequences for election system security and data integrity, if successful. Malicious actors could also attempt to insert



themselves into election systems as poll watchers and observers. Although reported instances of poll worker and poll watcher misconduct were sporadic in 2022, the presidential contest of 2024 is likely to encourage further efforts along these lines, given the higher political stakes.<sup>21</sup>

A third likely method are forms of harassment, threats, and intimidation that appear to have grown since the 2020 presidential election. These threats are driven primarily by conspiracy theories such as “Stop the Steal,” which falsely claims that Joe Biden won the 2020 election through systematic electoral fraud, and the beliefs of QAnon, a far-right antigovernment movement centered on a conspiracy theory that a shadowy cabal of satanic pedophilic elites secretly controls the U.S. government. (For further details, see the section “Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation.”)

Volunteers and officials involved in the election process, particularly those associated with counting ballots, are reportedly facing more threats.<sup>22</sup> There is strong evidence to suggest these behaviors are having significant effects on electoral workers. According to a survey by the Brennan Center for Justice published in April 2021, “one in three election officials felt unsafe because of their job and about 20% listed threats to their lives as a job-related concern.”<sup>23</sup> More threats against election officials have reportedly been noticed in key battleground states and local jurisdictions.<sup>24</sup> These threats are being deliberately directed at the heart of the democratic process. If



Stephen Parlato of Boulder, Colo., holds a sign in front of the U.S. Capitol, a year after an insurrectionist mob stormed in on Jan. 6, 2021. (Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

successful, this would impact the accuracy and timeliness of vote counting, which could indirectly cause more fear and agitation, and create doubt concerning the legitimacy of the election process.

This analysis assesses that far-right extremists will continue to threaten and intimidate election officials and volunteers as a deliberate strategy to influence or otherwise effectively undermine democratic processes. An

escalation in these tactics cannot be discounted, as this seems like a core strategic plan of action to purge unwanted public servants and replace them with extremist insiders.<sup>25</sup> In 2022, election denialist politicians also created what were effectively “election police forces” that investigated and arrested individuals based on allegations of voting illegally. Although there were few convictions resulting from these efforts, there is some evidence to suggest they deterred



some members of minority communities and ex-felons eligible to vote from showing up at the polls.<sup>26</sup>

A fourth likely method is frivolous administrative, legislative, and legal actions that attempt to suppress voter access. Since 2013, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key portions of the 1964 Voting Rights Act, hundreds of bills have been submitted in state legislatures across the country attempting to restrict voter access to the ballot, including measures challenging the validity of mail-in ballots, attempting to eliminate mail-in voting altogether, or requiring photo identification to vote, in the name of combating electoral fraud.<sup>27</sup> These bills reduce voter turnout<sup>28</sup> and affect whose votes are counted.<sup>29</sup> Such measures impact thousands of voters from racial minority,<sup>30</sup> youth,<sup>31</sup> lower socioeconomic status,<sup>32</sup> and elderly<sup>33</sup> demographic backgrounds, effectively deciding outcomes in highly competitive elections. While there has been no empirical evidence to substantiate claims of systematic voter fraud, studies have shown that such legislation, when passed, has had the effect of suppressing voter access, particularly among young adults and minorities. Others are likely to attempt frivolous lawsuits that effectively restrict voter access to the ballot box or challenge the validity of voter registration rolls.<sup>34</sup>

Another tactic that is very likely be used by malicious actors is attempting to overwhelm local and state election offices with large numbers of frivolous public records requests that create burdensome administrative challenges for

election officials. These efforts are highly likely to be enhanced using generative artificial intelligence and user-friendly software provided to election-denial activists that allows them to review and challenge voter rolls.<sup>35</sup>

Authors of this analysis are unaware of any commensurate electoral interference efforts emanating from the broader political left, including far-leftists. The closest approximation to such a threat was a single instance of alleged voter intimidation by three members of the New Black Panther Party – one of whom was brandishing a nightstick – who showed up outside of a polling station in a predominantly Black area of Philadelphia in 2008.<sup>36</sup> Outside of this incident, the authors of this analysis are unaware of any credible claims of threats or acts of electoral interference as described in this section. Moreover, as noted earlier, allegations of systematic voter fraud, as popularized by figures like Trump, are unproven thus far.

### **Rising Threats Toward Lawmakers and Legislative Facilities**

Coinciding with creeping illiberalism and authoritarianism in public discourse, as well as wider political polarization, there has been a growing trend of harassment, threats, and violence directed at local, state, and federal lawmakers. In 2017 a far-left extremist was killed by U.S. Capitol Police (USCP) officers during a shooting attack on Republican members of Congress during a baseball practice. Nearly four years later, the most dramatic

single act of violence against Congressional members occurred on Jan. 6, 2021, at the hands of insurrectionists largely led by far-right extremists believing that the 2020 elections were stolen from Trump. Almost two years later, another far-right extremist entered the San Francisco home of then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, and attacked her husband.

USCP data shows that they investigated 9,600 threat cases throughout 2021, after the Jan. 6 insurrection – the largest number of cases in a single year since the USCP started collecting data.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, DHS issued a warning stating that online calls for violent action against lawmakers are increasing.<sup>38</sup> A similar trend of rising threats has been self-reported by 1,744 state and local lawmakers in multiple surveys.<sup>39</sup> The surveys, published in October 2023 by the Brennan Center for Justice, with the assistance of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University, summarized their key findings as follows:

“More than 40 percent of state legislators experienced threats or attacks within the past three years, and more than 18 percent of local officeholders experienced threats or attacks within the past year and a half. The numbers balloon to 89 percent of state legislators and 52 percent of local officeholders when less severe forms of abuse – insults or harassment such as stalking – are included.<sup>40</sup>”

This analysis assesses that the threat will likely persist and intensify



in the months before and after the 2024 election. The likely factors motivating individuals to engage in acts of harassment, threats, and violence against lawmakers, such as political polarization and the growing normalization of violence in public discourse, tend to intensify during presidential election seasons. Hyperbolic and sometimes violence-laden rhetoric from key political figures like Trump are likely to give additional motives and perceived permission for violent far-right extremists to act. Meanwhile, although not quantitatively commensurate with the far right,<sup>41</sup> far-left violent extremists will be driven by the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict<sup>42</sup> plus the desire to countermobilize against the far right, to threaten elected officials.<sup>43</sup>

Since the Jan. 6 attack, enhanced physical security and situational awareness in and around the U.S.

Capitol complex means an attack is unlikely to succeed, though the complex will remain an attractive target to violent extremists on the far right. The risk of successful assassinations and attacks at and around local congressional offices is much higher due to lower levels of physical security (e.g., protective details). State houses in swing states, for example, become more attractive targets for attack.

Despite the presence of physical security at state legislatures, such as state capitol police forces, several of these facilities and their assets are at significant risk of attack because of their relatively higher level of vulnerability and the attractiveness they present as a symbolic target to violent extremists.<sup>44</sup> The risk of an attack, such as a mass shooting, is particularly elevated in state legislatures of “swing” states, as well as state capitols where public

attendees of legislative sessions are allowed to carry firearms and other weapons inside buildings. Local legislative bodies, such as county/municipal councils and school boards, are perhaps the most vulnerable to attack, as these bodies by default make themselves as physically accessible to the public as possible. The risk of an attack is somewhat mitigated by the lower symbolic attractiveness they may present as a target; however, data suggests this potential countereffect is modest. For example, a survey by Princeton University’s Bridging Divides Initiative randomly sampled local elected officials conducted between March and April 2024 found “more than one in six were harassed, and more than one in 12 were threatened.”<sup>45</sup>

Finally, it is important to note the plausibility of insider threats.

## State Legislator Perceptions of Abuse Since Taking Office

	Gender		Party		Overall
	Men	Women	Democrats	Republicans	
<b>Frequency</b>					
Increased	35%	43%	32%	45%	<b>38%</b>
Stayed about the same	39%	37%	40%	34%	<b>38%</b>
Decreased	17%	14%	20%	13%	<b>16%</b>
<b>Seriousness</b>					
Increased	24%	37%	28%	31%	<b>29%</b>
Stayed about the same	54%	49%	50%	51%	<b>51%</b>
Decreased	14%	8%	14%	10%	<b>12%</b>

NOTE: Results were weighted by census division, chamber, party, gender, year elected, state-level estimates of political ideology, and the level of professionalism of the officeholder’s legislature to achieve more nationally representative measures.

Source: Brennan Center for Justice and Rutgers University

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Threats and acts of violence against lawmakers can either be perpetrated or directly assisted by other legislative workers, including other lawmakers. For example, at a state level, far-right extremist Mike Nearman was expelled from the Oregon House of Representatives and later convicted of several misdemeanor crimes after he allowed violent protesters to enter the state capitol to disrupt a special legislative session.<sup>46</sup> At a federal level, though not rising to the level of an explicit threat of violence, members of Congress have engaged in incendiary and demonizing rhetoric directed at the colleagues which some people could interpret as an endorsement of violence. For example, prior to her election, far-right U.S. Representative Majorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican, had posted a Facebook photo of herself in possession of a firearm, “alongside images of (U.S. Reps. Alexandria) Ocasio-Cortez, (Ilhan) Omar and (Rashida) Tlaib and encouraged going on the ‘offense against these socialists’.”<sup>47</sup> After becoming a member of Congress, when expressing her opposition to a proposed infrastructure bill, she posted online the names and phone numbers of 13 GOP colleagues who voted for the legislation and called them “traitors” on Twitter.<sup>48</sup>

The likelihood of insider verbal threats is assessed to be high, given that the polarized national atmosphere and local district politics provide incentives for such behavior. Relative to verbal threats, insider-enabled and -caused acts of physical violence are far less likely. In between these two types of threats are external actors who

are inspired to commit acts of violence based on dehumanizing and demonizing rhetoric from one lawmaker directed at one or more other colleagues, such as anti-left and anti-Muslim statements from politicians like Greene<sup>49</sup> and Lauren Boebert, R-Colo.<sup>50</sup> This conclusion is tempered and moderated by which legislative bodies are the possible sites of an attack; state legislatures that allow firearms in and around their facilities are at higher risk due to their greater vulnerability and raised profile as attractive symbolic targets.

### **Extremist Insider Threat**

As noted earlier, individuals with malicious intent and special access and authorization to institutions like election offices and legislative bodies are significant potential insider threats. Although rare in terms of size and occurrence, insider threat cases within these institutions have potentially devastating consequences for their continued functions and the vital roles they play in democratic governance. In addition to officials involved in the election process and members of legislative bodies, law enforcement organizations at federal, state, and local levels are also facing challenges of potential insider threats.

Some of these organizations, like county sheriff’s offices, are led by individuals who are directly elected to leadership. A far-right extremist movement called Constitutional Sheriffs has been attempting to recruit and radicalize organizational leadership, as well as rank-and-file departmental members across the country,

for decades.<sup>51</sup> This movement advocates a particular kind of far-right antigovernment ideology that claims, wrongly, that county sheriffs are the most powerful elected officials in the United States and can abrogate any laws they deem “unconstitutional,” including federal legislation.<sup>52</sup> Demographics, heavy political skewing, and widely divergent regulatory mechanisms across county and state lines are significant structural factors that have facilitated far-right recruitment and radicalization from among organizational leadership, as well as rank-and-file employees.<sup>53</sup> Although systematic empirical evidence is difficult to come by, existing research suggests that the Constitutional Sheriffs movement appears to have made the most inroads among law enforcement personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>54</sup>

The potential threats posed by Constitutional Sheriffs movement insiders largely depend upon their organizational mandates. Functions of sheriff’s offices vary widely across the country, with some only focused on court security or running detention facilities (i.e., county jails), whereas others also engage in patrolling and other policing functions. Based on public statements from movement supporters, known organizational mandates, and past behavior, this analysis assesses the two areas at greatest risk of being impacted by potential Constitutional Sheriffs insider threats are physical security at and around election-related facilities and border security. For example, members of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA),





# Constitutional Sheriffs

The movement is based on, among other things, the false belief that county sheriffs can abrogate any laws – even federal laws – that they deem “unconstitutional.”

This ideology influences far-right sheriffs, some of whom have openly stated a willingness to interfere in election processes.



Pictured: Sheriff Richard Mack, leader of the Constitutional Sheriffs

Source: Daryl Johnson and Alejandro Beutel

the leading organization of the Constitutional Sheriffs movement, have openly expressed election denialism since 2020 and explicitly advocated for electoral interference through actions like seizing voting machines and investigating unsubstantiated claims of systematic voter fraud.<sup>55</sup> Many movement supporters also combine election denialism with explicitly nativist and anti-immigrant rhetoric.<sup>56</sup> Several county sheriffs with connections to the movement have either openly advocated for engaging in enforcement of federal immigration laws, including operating along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas sheriff’s offices engage in law enforcement activities, extremism in the ranks risks damaging organizational reputation and public safety.



The Constitutional Sheriffs & Peace Officers Association (logo pictured) is the main Constitutional Sheriffs organization and has expressed election denialism since 2020.

There is growing awareness of a far-right extremist presence and inroads among other policing department staff and correctional employees. For example, a study by legal scholar Vida Johnson has identified over 140 cases of far-right extremism in local and state policing and correctional entities across the United States since at least 1999. (This is likely an undercount of the phenomenon, since Johnson’s list of cases was entirely drawn from media reports.) Even beyond hardcore extremists, like members of white supremacist and antigovernment organizations, critics maintain that the size and scope of the issue is much larger if individuals who may, to varying



The Constitutional Sheriffs movement could affect border security, as several sheriffs connected to the movement have advocated operating along the U.S.-Mexico border.

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degrees, share sympathies with such ideologies without openly expressing support for them are accounted for.<sup>58</sup>

However, it is important to note that the mere presence of such individuals inside these organizations erodes public confidence in their ability to enforce the law in an impartial and professional manner.<sup>59</sup> There has also been growing concern about how far-right extremists from antigovernment movements like the Constitutional Sheriffs and groups like the Oath Keepers have been able to train hundreds of peace officers across the country for years.<sup>60</sup> From an



operational perspective, there have also been concerns about how far-right extremist insiders can also disrupt the day-to-day functioning of policing, including credible allegations of biased policing, excessive use of force,<sup>61</sup> potentially accessing sensitive information systems,<sup>62</sup> giving intelligence tip-offs to extremists,<sup>63</sup> and distorting analytic threat perceptions that inform how potential threats are monitored.<sup>64</sup> As far-right extremists attempt to mobilize, this analysis assesses there will be a growing risk of intelligence tip-offs, as well as pollution of intelligence streams, from actors seeking to disseminate mis- and disinformation that could be consumed by analysts at entities like fusion centers.

This concern extends to personnel within federal agencies. For example, investigative researchers and reporters have documented the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim content making its way into military and law enforcement classrooms under the guise of counterterrorism training.<sup>65</sup> Several military and federal law enforcement far-right insiders have been arrested for activities ranging from enabling or planning acts of terrorism to unauthorized disclosure of classified information. Military insider threats include cases of alleged espionage-related crimes<sup>66</sup> and planned<sup>67</sup> and executed acts of political violence,<sup>68</sup> including participation in the Jan. 6 insurrection on Capitol Hill. The disproportionately high number of military veterans participating in the Jan. 6 insurrection,<sup>69</sup> as well as involvement in other acts of far-right violence,<sup>70</sup>

has prompted concerns from policymakers about the prevalence of extremism within the armed services.<sup>71</sup> Efforts to study this issue further have been met with significant political pushback at the congressional level.<sup>72</sup>

Beyond the military, although not further substantiated at the moment, there are also allegations that some FBI agents have not been actively pursuing leads in investigations of alleged Jan. 6 insurrectionists due to political sympathies impairing their ability to professionally carry out their responsibilities.<sup>73</sup> On March 11, 2022, the Department of Homeland Security published an internal review of potential domestic extremism within its ranks.<sup>74</sup> The review came after several investigative reports over the years identified current and former personnel either engaging in expressions of racist and other extremist content on social media<sup>75</sup> and attempted acts of violence<sup>76</sup> or with direct connections to extremist groups that have engaged in violence, like the neo-Nazi organization, The Base.<sup>77</sup> Finally, investigative reports have identified at least two active Department of State employees with security clearances who were identified as active white nationalists while serving in public trust positions with access to sensitive information.<sup>78</sup>

This publication's assessment of the potential insider threat landscape suggests it will continue to be a serious issue for local, state, and federal agencies for several years to come. Although known insider threats are statistically rare, they have potentially devastating

consequences to the entities they are employed with, as well as public safety and national security.

Outside of malicious electoral officials, the most devastating potential insider threats are far-right sheriffs, influenced by Constitutional Sheriffs ideology and the mainstreaming of election denialism, who seek to interfere in the electoral process. This judgment is based on the growing influence of extremist ideology, their openly stated willingness to effectively interfere in election processes,<sup>79</sup> and their access and proximity to critical voting infrastructure. Moreover, because many sheriff's departments engage in policing duties, the presence of extremist insiders also poses a risk to organizational reputation and a potential threat to the fair, impartial, and effective provision of public safety.

The likelihood of individual police officers outside sheriff's departments engaging in politically biased enforcement of the law is high. Law enforcement officers, although maintaining a professional obligation to impartially enforce the law and uphold public safety, nevertheless represent a cross-section of American society, and some individual officers are subject to the influence of its political winds, like other people. For example, there is robust empirical evidence to suggest that police officers with political affinities toward the authoritarian and illiberal views espoused by figures like Trump are more likely to engage in racially biased policing behaviors than their police officer peers who do not politically



support him.<sup>80</sup> The risk of biased policing is further amplified by distorted threat perceptions resulting from a combination of chronic poor analytic tradecraft and quality control at fusion centers, training content containing extremist material and views, and the pervasiveness of mis/disinformation.

Finally, military insider threats pose a serious challenge mainly to national security and public safety. However, they do not pose a threat to the integrity of democratic procedural foundations the way far-right sheriffs could. This analysis assesses with high confidence that the most likely manifestation of this issue over the next 12 months will be extremist violence, given the sustained and heightened level of armed mobilization by far-right actors who, as of late, constitute the overwhelming majority of publicly known violent ideologically motivated military insider threats. It also anticipates that there will be further attempts by far-right actors to disclose classified or otherwise sensitive U.S. national security information. Notwithstanding the high-profile act of fatal self-immolation<sup>81</sup> in protest of the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip by an active-duty military service member, far-left insider threats of violence currently are judged to be negligible. However, ongoing discontent within multiple federal agencies over the Biden administration's policies toward Israel and Gaza raise the probability of not only increased resignation of staff,<sup>82</sup> but also the potential unauthorized



A demonstrator supporting the people who have been imprisoned following the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection yells at counterprotesters during a rally near the U.S. Capitol. (Stefani Reynolds / AFP via Getty Images)

disclosure of information, just as far-right insiders have leaked U.S. government information about Ukraine.

## Theme 2: Sociopolitical Trends and Events

### Political Polarization

One of the strongest forces affecting the current domestic extremist landscape in the United States is political polarization. This publication considers polarization to fall into two broad categories that experts have identified: 1) ideological, which is based on policy/philosophical ideas and generally expressed among political elites; and 2) affective, which is based on social identities (e.g. political party affiliation) and emotions and is generally expressed among grassroots citizenry.<sup>83</sup>

A 2023 comprehensive review of existing studies by Rachel Kleinfeld of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace identifies several key findings from the existing body of research. First, although studies have varying strengths and weaknesses, taken collectively, they suggest that political polarization is a real issue that is impacting social relations, democratic governance, and political violence in the United States. Second, political elites are much more ideologically polarized than their constituents are; grassroots citizenry, however, are highly affectively (i.e., emotionally) polarized. Third, this affective polarization is not the product of emotions alone; it is the outcome of an interaction between electoral system designs, political candidate tone/behavior, and voters' social networks (i.e., personal relationships with other people, irrespective of political ideology). Finally, although its



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‘ **Political emotions will continue to run high in no small part because of the growing salience and divergent responses to social wedge issues – to varying degrees – of mis/disinformation over traditional social media platforms, and the political centrality of the 2024 U.S. national elections.** ’

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exact causes remain unclear, increasing rates of political violence appear to be associated with a growing trend of hyperbolic rhetoric among politicians that dehumanizes opponents and normalizes violence.<sup>84</sup>

Already-intense political polarization is expected to grow over the next 12 months. The structural variables that enable and facilitate political polarization, such as winner-take-all voting systems, largely remain in place in most states. Political emotions will continue to run high in no small part because of the growing salience and divergent responses to social wedge issues (see the next section), the presence – to varying degrees – of mis/disinformation over traditional and social media platforms, and the political centrality of the 2024 U.S. national elections. The upcoming elections will further incentivize candidates, such as Trump and his allies, to engage in hyperbolic rhetoric/behavior.

This analysis predicts political polarization will grow in two directions.

First, it will be directed between outgroups. In this case, right-wing and left-wing actors will focus most of their mobilizing energies

externally toward each other. Consistent with existing research, polarization is expected to be elevated in states that employ winner-take-all electoral rules. Polarization is expected to be particularly elevated in so-called “swing states,” where congressional and presidential campaigns are projected to be highly competitive.

Second, it will be directed within left-wing and right-wing milieus. Among left-wing actors, growing discontent over Biden’s policies and political posturing in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict will continue fueling discontent and dissent. In some of the most extreme cases, actors have expressed extremist beliefs like antisemitism and engaged in illicit/illegal activities, such as harassment, threats, vandalism, and violence directed at congressional officials and offices.<sup>85</sup> Such activities are likely to continue as Israel’s military operations in the Gaza Strip and violent escalations with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon lead to further civilian casualties. Among right-wing actors, it is expected that candidates and political figures who are perceived to be too “moderate” or compromising on key issues of interest are likely to be targeted for harassment, threats, vandalism, and violence.<sup>86</sup>

### **Divergent Responses to Social Wedge Issues**

The broadly divergent responses to social wedge issues that are strongly associated with political polarization constitute another factor. For those on the wider political left, including far-leftists, the issues include the growing gap between rich and poor, climate change, gender/reproductive rights, police reform, racial disparities in socioeconomic outcomes, and a countermobilization against far-right actors during protests, rallies, and civil unrest. For those on the wider political right, including far-right actors, the issues include immigration/border security; opposition to “Critical Race Theory” (also known as CRT) curricula in K-12 schools and universities; workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (also known as DEI) policies; the teaching of LGBTQ+ content in K-12 schools; concerns about systematic electoral fraud; and limiting access to abortion. Many far-right actors also express ardent opposition to far-left countermobilization, often described in pejoratively nebulous, and often conspiratorial, terms like “Black Lives Matter,” “antifa,” (the antifascist movement), and “George Soros” – the latter a reference to a philanthropist who happens to be



Jewish and champions politically progressive causes.

Two major inflection points highlight growing far-left mobilization. First was Trump's 2016 presidential candidacy and later victory. Whether intentional or not, Trump's bellicose posturing and hardline policy positions mobilized already-active far-right actors, including violent ones,<sup>87</sup> and signaled a growing transformation of large segments of mainstream conservative discourse into right-wing populist authoritarianism. This led to a wider centrist and left-wing political backlash that included a re-energized and resurgent far-left component. This backlash was sustained for the duration of the Trump administration.

The second major inflection point came during the mass protests and civil unrest across America in the summer of 2020. These protests, a minority of which turned violent, were triggered by moral outrage at the police-caused death of George Floyd. Prior to Floyd's death, a handful of cities saw moral outrage and mass protests in reaction to the police-caused deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, both Black men. This also led to a microtrend of ideologically motivated targeted violence in 2016 by Black nationalists, some of whom were motivated by left-wing beliefs.

Floyd's death, and several other controversial police-caused homicides of minorities, triggered a much wider social reaction, as they came months before the 2020 national presidential elections and

in the middle of the country coping with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the wider mass protest movement that emerged, far-left and far-right actors also mobilized and sometimes clashed with police or each other.

Although the Trump administration left office in January 2021, far-leftists, including violent elements, remain active. They have been energized by far-rightists protesting at LGBTQ+ events and establishments, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and most recently, moral outrage at civilian deaths resulting from the current Israel-Hamas war. The latter issue, along with broader concerns about a re-energized far right and possible Trump electoral victory, is expected to continue giving far-left mobilization energy and momentum. Recent acts of self-immolation suggest that targets associated with these issues, including Israeli consulates and its embassy<sup>88</sup> as well as locations where Trump is physically present,<sup>89</sup> are likely to be areas of intensified far-left activity, including the potential for property damage and physical attacks against people.

Contemporary far-right mobilization can also be anchored to at least two major inflection points. The first is the summer of 2008, when the U.S. economy was in its worst recession since the Great Depression, Barack Obama became the Democratic party's presidential nominee, and veterans were returning from overseas conflict theaters that made them vulnerable to far-right radicalization and recruitment. Obama's subsequent

victory, and its associated racial resentment, further energized and mobilized a right-wing backlash against America's first Black president. This included a substantial far-right undercurrent of antigovernment and white nationalist extremists.

The second inflection point was Trump's presidential candidacy in 2015 and election the next year. As noted earlier, whether this outcome was intentional or not, far-right extremists gravitated toward Trump both for his incendiary rhetoric and for several of his policy positions, which they frequently interpreted as a tacit and sometimes explicit endorsement of their views on matters of race, immigration, crime, and demographics.

Far-rightists, including their violent elements, remain active. Despite the intensive law enforcement scrutiny of formal organizations, such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, that has occurred since the Jan. 6 insurrection, their underlying ideologies remain active. The Proud Boys adapted to their new operational environment by decentralizing their organizational structure and maintaining their political relevance by showing up to locally focused protests and rallies. Although maintaining an ideology centered on an exclusivist nationalism ("Western chauvinism") that is stridently anti-leftist in political orientation, the Proud Boys have also always maintained a strong hypermasculine and extreme misogynist undercurrent in its wider ideology. Post-Jan. 6, the importance of its positions on hypermasculinity and gender more broadly became central to its



# The Two Most Notable Categories of Domestic Extremism

NOTE: Actors are mentioned for illustrative purposes. While these groups and movements are not criminal entities, several of their individual members and supporters have been involved in illegal activities like violence.

## Far-Right Actors

## Far-Left Actors

Oath Keepers

Proud Boys

Antifascist Action (Antifa)

Anarchists



Motivated by multiple socio-political issues and coalescing around populist figures like Donald Trump and allies such as former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, far-right actors are considered the largest domestic extremist threat to democratic norms and governance, as well as public safety and national security.

Far-left actors pose a smaller, non-trivial threat to liberal democratic norms and governance. However, far-left and far-right actors are also motivated to mobilize against each other.

Source: Daryl Johnson and Alejandro Beutel

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mobilization and survival, as the group increasingly participated, sometimes armed, in activities such as antiabortion rallies, protests of reading events by drag queens at public libraries, and the expression of opposition to the teaching of LGBTQ+ content in school curricula.

The Oath Keepers, by contrast, appear to be organizationally in disarray and all but defunct at

a national level with the arrest and conviction of key leaders like Stewart Rhodes.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, the underlying ideologies that the organization coalesced and mobilized itself around – antigovernment extremism, including militia and Constitutional Sheriffs subcurrents – remain extremely active within the wider far-right milieu. Like the Proud Boys, antigovernment extremist

actors like the Oath Keepers and various Three Percenter movement groups have adapted to intensified post-Jan. 6 law enforcement scrutiny and arrests by reorganizing themselves as locally- and regionally-focused structures.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the salience of immigration in public discourse has meant that many antigovernment far-rightists, particularly within its militia and Constitutional Sheriffs



subcurrents, have refocused their activities and rhetoric on the U.S.-Mexico border. Meanwhile, white nationalists also continue to remain active and energized despite intensified scrutiny since Jan. 6, 2021. One salient example is Nick Fuentes, a white nationalist who founded the America First PAC (AFPAC) and has a dedicated set of followers online and in real life. Although the influence of Fuentes' AFPAC appears to be limited, as judged by the number and type of public figures it attracts to its events, the institution is nevertheless an important organizational landmark within a wider network of actors – including the aforementioned Oath Keepers and Proud Boys – that seeks to inject far-right extremist ideas into mainstream right-wing discourse.<sup>92</sup> Another is the Patriot Front, a white nationalist organization associated with several individuals who were arrested for attempting to engage in or executing acts of political violence. For example, 31 members were arrested in Coeur d'Alene Idaho, on June 11, 2022, as they were en route to attack a LGBTQ+ Pride Month parade.<sup>93</sup> They have also been involved in distributing most of the reported white nationalist leaflet propaganda since 2019, as well as organizing or participating in several demonstrations and otherwise lawful political assemblies since 2017 when the organization was founded.<sup>94</sup>

Far-right extremists are likely to continue being energized by Trump's presidential candidacy, anger at perceived expansion of LGBTQ+ rights, and immigration. Insofar as social wedge issues

influence the political behaviors of far-rightists, this analysis predicts that there will continue to be large amounts of proposed state legislation that erodes and restricts rights and freedoms related to gender, sexuality, and reproductive health. However, it is also predicted that most in-person mobilization will take place in the form of vigilante border patrols that will occasionally be conducted with the tacit approval of some actors within local, state, and federal law enforcement, as well as engaging in political assemblies seeking to support Trump and the wider MAGA populist movement.

It is also important to note that substantial segments of the broader left and right, including their far-left/-right subcurrents, have also coalesced and mobilized around the armed conflict in Gaza between Hamas and its allied factions and the Israeli military.

### **Discontent Over Law Enforcement Practices and Powers**

While several key social wedge issues are energizing far-left and far-right actors to mobilize, perceptions of law enforcement and policing deserve special attention because of their salience in public discourse over at least the past five years. On the political right, discontent has grown over how the U.S. federal government, particularly agents under the DOJ and FBI, are perceived to be biased against them. This is largely anger at criminal investigations of Trump supporters, including the former president himself, several of his aides and former administration

officials, and alleged Jan. 6 insurrectionists. It has resulted in the perpetuation of public outrage that culminated in the creation of a U.S. House "Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government," chaired by far-right congressional representative and staunch Trump ally Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican.

However, this anger has also created a permissive environment for threats and acts of violence. The FBI and DOJ have arrested over 1,250 individuals who participated in the Jan. 6 Capitol attack in 2021.<sup>95</sup> More persons are under investigation for criminal acts during that event. The recent convictions and sentencing proceedings for some of those arrested for criminal activities and violence during the Capitol insurrection has caused outrage among supporters and calls to pardon most of those convicted. Far-right extremists are making more violent threats to the FBI and DOJ related to the search of Trump's Florida residence, Mar-a-Lago, on Aug. 8, 2022, among other factors.<sup>96</sup> For example, on Aug. 9, 2023, FBI agents investigating a death threat made against Biden shot and killed an anti-government far-right extremist in Provo, Utah, after he threatened them and reportedly reached for a gun as agents were executing an arrest warrant at his residence.<sup>97</sup> Also, in August 2022, an armed man in body armor who is believed to have attended the Jan. 6 riot the previous year attempted an unauthorized entry of the FBI Field Office in Cincinnati, then fled. During the subsequent chase by state police,



the suspect opened fire on police, and police shot and killed him. The confrontation occurred soon after the FBI had searched Mar-a-Lago in connection with an investigation of Trump over his alleged improper retention of classified documents.<sup>98</sup> The FBI had previously warned of increased threats against federal agents in the wake of the raid.<sup>99</sup>

Whereas within the wider political right, including the far-right, discontent toward law enforcement is directed toward the federal agencies, on the wider political left, including among far-leftists, it is mostly directed at local and state-level actors. (This is not to suggest that actors on broader political left, including the far-left, do not express discontent toward federal law enforcement, such as the FBI and the Bureau of Immigration, and Customs Enforcement. Indeed, there is a long history of federal law enforcement actors targeting left-wing activists

and groups solely based on their political activities rather than due to individualized suspicion of criminal wrongdoing.) The overwhelming majority of current left-wing political mobilization is centered on anger at law enforcement abuses and police reform or abolition. In this context, the far left has been mostly nonviolent and has engaged in a range of activities that include attempted passage of legislation, protests, and mass education. This was most evident in the May-June 2020 political protests and civil disturbances that swept across the United States in the wake of Floyd's death.

Nevertheless some far-left extremists have also latched onto the issue of police reform to advance their narratives with the intent of mobilizing existing supporters as well as radicalizing and recruiting new ones. (In general, violent far-left extremists' narratives,

In this handout photo provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, stacks of boxes can be observed in the White and Gold Ballroom of former U.S. President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida. (U.S. Department of Justice via Getty Images)

aggressive training regime, and direct-action campaigns provide a platform for inspiring individuals to radicalize and mobilize, posing a potential threat to political conventions, economic summits, law enforcement, and other symbols of capitalism, globalization, social injustice, and other potential targets.) For example, though the protests and civil disturbances across the nation were overwhelmingly nonviolent and lawful, several events demonstrated evidence of a far-left presence, such as groups representing left-wing extremist strands of Black Nationalism, violent antifa extremists, and





anarchist extremists.<sup>100</sup> Several of these events turned violent.<sup>101</sup>

For the most part, far-leftists engage in nonviolent, but often disruptive “direct action” tactics that include protesting/counterprotesting and civil disobedience (e.g., “die-ins” and unlawfully occupying buildings, public spaces, and transportation arteries). Nevertheless, a fringe of far-leftists has also undertaken acts of violence. These are largely directed at property rather than people, and most attacks against people are intentionally non-fatal. An important exception to this otherwise non-fatal trend is attacks against police officers, which are often intentionally fatal and have been consistently so since the 1970s. A similar micro-trend was assessed in the years leading up to 2020, with retaliation from violent Black nationalists and several controversial police shootings garnering attention – most notably the 2016 mass shootings of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, which came days after the widely publicized fatal police shootings of Castile and Sterling.<sup>102</sup>

A more recent example, which began in January 2023 and is ongoing, is the opposition to the construction of a large public safety training center for both law enforcement and first responders, commonly known as “Cop City,” in the Weelaunee Forest near Atlanta. While there is widespread opposition to the construction of the facility, within this broader movement is a small coalition of various far-left actors.<sup>103</sup> Several individuals associated with this coalition

have infiltrated demonstrations and turned otherwise peaceful protests into violence. Both police officers and protesters have been injured in these violent clashes. In October 2023, Georgia state troopers shot and killed a protester when he began firing a handgun at them during an enforcement operation.<sup>104</sup> Several arrests have also been made during separate incidents.<sup>105</sup> Also, on Sept. 3, 2020, U.S. Marshals shot and killed a violent far-left extremist in Lacey, Washington, as they attempted to arrest him in connection with the slaying of a Patriot Prayer protester in Portland, Oregon. The suspect reportedly displayed aggression toward the federal agents prior to being fatally shot.<sup>106</sup>

However, beyond law enforcement, there has been an increasing number cases of intentionally fatal attack attempts against civilians, raising a question as to whether there is a shift in targeting behaviors enabled by a potential erosion of “internal brakes” on certain types of violence.<sup>107</sup> For example, there have been notable shooting attacks on immigration detention facilities, Republican members of Congress, and a thwarted assassination of a U.S. Supreme Court justice, among other incidents, since 2017. These attacks have come amid intensifying social division and moral outrage over issues related to border security, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and the political attitudes toward the Trump administration.<sup>108</sup>

This publication anticipates that the issue of law enforcement practices and policies will continue to be

an intense point of debate and a sociopolitical flashpoint going into the 2024 elections, especially as legislation on police reforms has stalled and moral outrage toward federal agencies continues. For the most part, within the broader political left and right, this will manifest as typical civic and political activities such as lobbying, voting, political assemblies, and in some cases disruptive direct-action tactics. However, the socially contentious nature of these issues, residing within a wider context of elevated political polarization, also means the risk of violence against federal, state, and local law enforcement and the Department of Justice will continue to grow in 2024 and into 2025.

The likelihood of violence, including both property damage and attempted attacks against police personnel by far-left actors, will be especially elevated in places where police-community relations are already tense. Incidents such as perceived unjustified use of police force, fatal or not, against civilians, especially if a member of a racial/ethnic minority community, could spark unrest, including violence.

The likelihood of violence, particularly fatal attacks against police and judicial personnel by far-right actors, will be especially elevated where Trump is or might be convicted in the state and/or federal court venues where legal proceedings concerning his alleged crimes are taking place. Judges presiding over his cases and prosecutors litigating against him are at a particularly high risk of assassination attempts, and the judicial facilities where the trials



are being held could be targets of riots and other attacks.<sup>109</sup> This is especially the case in instances where Trump uses his social media accounts to assail the credibility and integrity of the judicial personnel and processes surrounding his court cases. FBI and DOJ personnel and facilities are also at risk of attack when there is heightened publicity associated with federal criminal court cases involving Trump.

### Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation

The proliferation of false information, whether in the form of misinformation, disinformation, and/or conspiracy theories plays an influential role in the mobilization of actors within the domestic mainstream and extremist political landscapes.<sup>110</sup> Before describing and assessing the potential impact of this issue further, it is necessary to define key terms first (see chart).

While media outlets and policymakers have been sounding the alarm over mis- and disinformation for many years, including in the run-up to the 2024 elections, recent academic research has poured cold water on potentially overhyping the threat it poses to democratic procedural foundations and voter behavior. Providing a roundup of the existing research, scholars from New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics point out that: 1) mis/disinformation constitutes a small percentage of the content they consume daily; 2) to the extent it exists, mis/disinformation is clustered around a tiny minority of Americans; and 3) given the U.S.'s heavy political polarization, most voters have already made up their minds before Election Day,<sup>111</sup> similar to other studies suggesting "fake news [mis/disinformation] is more likely to enhance existing beliefs and views rather than

radically change voting intentions of the undecided."<sup>112</sup>

To the extent mis/disinformation does impact voter behavior, studies suggest there are effects on instigating political party defection and informing voters' (mis) perceptions of electoral fairness, which in turn influences their decisions to participate (or not) in elections.<sup>113</sup> While scholars stress that mis/disinformation's effects are modest on voter behaviors within the overall electorate, they can still have influential outcomes, especially in highly competitive elections – which is exactly what pollsters have forecast the 2024 U.S. national elections to be.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the same scholars from New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics point out that the full impact of artificial intelligence, while still emerging, has the potential to significantly enhance both the scale and quality of false information proliferating in the public square. They also

## Categories of False Information

	Description
<b>Misinformation</b>	False or inaccurate information that simply gets facts wrong without intent to deliberately deceive the information consumer. <sup>115</sup>
<b>Disinformation</b>	False or inaccurate information that intentionally misstates facts or completely fabricates information with the intent to mislead and/or deceive. <sup>116</sup>
<b>Conspiracy Theory</b>	A belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome, and that their conspiracy is of public interest but not public knowledge. Within the context of mis/disinformation, one of its key characteristics is that it is "epistemically risky," or that, when compared to other beliefs, is less plausible and less likely to be true. Thus, conspiracy theories frequently reside within realms of misinformation and disinformation. <sup>117</sup>



point out, consistent with other studies, that certain platforms like TikTok are especially vulnerable to AI-charged disinformation based on their technical structure and their young user base's relative susceptibility to believing false information compared to older social media consumers (who nevertheless are more likely to share false information).<sup>118</sup>

Based on the authors' knowledge of the field, they assess the following conspiracy theories, and associated mis/disinformation, to be most the influential in the next 12 months (see chart).

These conspiracy theories are common to the far right and have varying degrees of legitimacy within the wider mainstream political right. They are disseminated widely over the internet via a massive and steady stream of online misinformation and disinformation. They are further amplified by influential figures ranging from former political officials like Trump and former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn to media personalities such as Tucker Carlson. Moreover, these conspiracy theories and their closely linked mis/disinformation remain persistently prevalent. For

example, denialism surrounding the 2020 presidential election results remains a common refrain among many right-wing candidates and figures despite rulings by federal judges, lawsuit dismissals, investigative findings that ruled out election fraud or vote tampering, and a Supreme Court ruling.<sup>120</sup>

Similarly, QAnon and the Great Replacement Theory continue to thrive and grow among various DVE movements, particularly those on the far right. In the past, these narratives have been boosted by foreign actors like Russia and, to a lesser extent,

## The Most Influential Conspiracy Theories for the Next 12 Months

	Description
<b>Stop the Steal</b>	Also referred to as the "Big Lie" by its critics, this conspiracy theory uses persistent election denial misinformation and disinformation to advance the false notion that Trump was the true victor of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. By extension, adherents of this conspiracy theory stridently assert that Biden "stole" the election through mass election fraud.
<b>The Great Replacement</b>	This conspiracy theory asserts that a cabal of actors – such as Jews, Marxists, Democrats, and others – are deliberately engaging in a long-term social engineering project by changing the racial demographics of America. More specifically, the central claim is that various actors and interests seek to turn the United States into a socialist state by allowing mass migration, legally and illegally, of non-whites, who will presumably vote for Democrats, thereby allowing the political left to win elections and enact its agenda. A closely related variant of this conspiracy theory is "white genocide," in which Jews and others are alleged to be conspiring to enact a demographic decline of whites in historically European-dominated societies as part of a long-term race war.
<b>QAnon</b>	This is simultaneously a "big tent" conspiracy theory with numerous subvariants around the world and a global movement that tends to be antigovernment in ideological orientation. In the United States (and many other Western nations), QAnon is a subcurrent of far-right antigovernment extremism. As one expert explains, "The basic premise is that a group of high-level military intelligence officials close to Trump, QAnon followers believe, are sending out secret coded messages on these image boards about this great grand battle of good vs. evil, in which Trump and what they call the Q Team are working to destroy a global cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles, which the QAnon community believes is controlling everything. And that includes politician(s), entertainment, and the media." <sup>119</sup>



China. Many of these conspiracy theories are referenced in violent far-right extremist manifestos affiliated with mass shootings, vehicle ramming attacks, and other acts of domestic terrorism.<sup>121</sup> Conspiracies and disinformation will impact the recruitment, violent radicalization, and mobilization of extremists and increase their potential for violence leading up to and during the upcoming 2024 presidential election and beyond. As noted earlier, conspiracies and disinformation have become increasingly mainstreamed, as has the notion that violent and criminal participants in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol are considered “patriots.”<sup>122</sup>

Meanwhile, the far left does not have any salient conspiracy theories commensurate with the scale, volume of content, and level of mainstream support found on the far right. Nevertheless, far-left actors have also been subject to misinformation and disinformation in the past from foreign actors such as Russia and China. There is also concern that social media platforms with a significant youth user demographic – a demographic that also skews politically left and is highly susceptible to believing false information – such as TikTok, will provide an important avenue for false information.<sup>123</sup> The current Israel-Hamas conflict has also given malicious actors an opportunity to disseminate false information to multiple parties with vested interests in the conflict, including far leftists. Recent activities involving a heavy far-left presence, such as pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses, can serve as potential

vectors for mis- and disinformation. However, the U.S. intelligence community recently assessed that these political assemblies were not fueled, thus far, by foreign disinformation.<sup>124</sup>

This analysis anticipates a rise in false information disseminated over social media and amplified by political figures in more traditional media outlets (e.g., television and radio) in the run-up to the 2024 elections. It also expects that conspiracy theories and their associated mis/disinformation will be circulating at a faster rate than in non-electoral years. Conspiracy theories favored by the far right will mobilize extremists and wider segments of the political right. Most of this mobilization will manifest in political assemblies and in casting ballots for Trump and his political allies. Trump uses conspiracy theories, or themes related to them, to continue stirring up his base of supporters into believing falsehoods such as the 2020 election was stolen.<sup>125</sup>

The issue of artificial intelligence being used to synthetically produce “deepfake” audiovisual material is gaining public interest. While there has been substantial attention paid to how deepfakes can be used in political disinformation campaigns, there has been limited empirical evidence to measure their effects on political attitudes and behaviors,<sup>126</sup> including voting. (Again, existing evidence suggests disinformation in general has modest impacts on voter behavior, while other studies show that deepfakes can be effective in microtargeting campaigns,<sup>127</sup> but this limits the scalability of impact.)

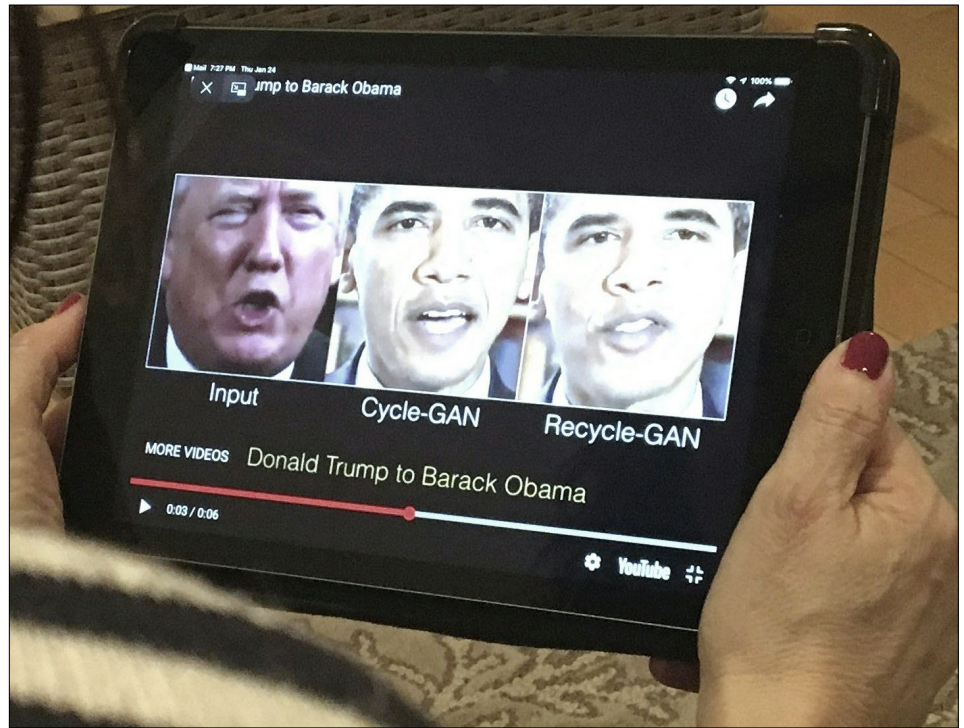
Moreover, while technology continues to rapidly develop, deepfakes – especially video and visual material – often contain production flaws that can be spotted with the naked eye.<sup>128</sup> Technological developments also run in the opposite direction: There has been a proliferation of firms offering services that can detect deepfakes, further mitigating their potential impacts.<sup>129</sup> Finally, the very content of a deepfake can also undermine its credibility to a target audience. Studies have pointed out that if the content of mis/disinformation, such as a politician’s statement on an issue, seems to be out of step with what they have previously said on the matter, it is less likely to be believed by its audience.<sup>130</sup>

By comparison, although given substantially less attention among researchers, media, and policymakers, “cheapfakes” are another form of audiovisual manipulation used to produce mis/disinformation, but without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Cheapfakes are often created using commercially available software that can produce photoshopped, re-contextualized and speed-manipulated (i.e., sped up or slowed down) material.<sup>131</sup> Compared to deepfakes, cheapfakes require less technical sophistication and time to produce,<sup>132</sup> yet they can be just as potentially deceptive.<sup>133</sup> Most of the much-publicized Russian online disinformation operations during the 2016 U.S. elections were consistent with this latter category of content and involved low-tech methods.



Although the growing use of AI-disseminated and -generated false information, including deepfakes, is to be expected relative to the amount of mis/disinformation in the 2022 midterms,<sup>134</sup> this publication anticipates that malicious actors will likely continue to favor using lower-tech methods of information manipulation, including cheapfakes. This is in large part due to lower technological barriers to entry for cheapfakes, the well-known and easily accessible means to engage in low-tech information manipulation, and their ability to be as persuasive as deepfakes. The one area likely to see AI deployed at mass scale is the attempts at electoral interference, particularly through frivolous administrative requests that seek to challenge the validity of voter databases.

The U.S.'s false information landscape is further complicated by the active roles foreign states, namely Russia and China, are playing. Both countries have a shared interest in countering U.S. and allied influence around the world while expanding their own. China wishes to continue expanding its diplomatic and economic "soft" power in strategically-important regions such as the Middle East<sup>135</sup> and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, it wishes to extend its rule, by force if necessary, over Taiwan, which it regards as a breakaway province.<sup>137</sup> Taiwan is also strategic in that it is the global center of semiconductor chip manufacturing<sup>138</sup> and is a linchpin in U.S. efforts to prevent China from achieving a strategic military breakout into the wider Pacific Basin.<sup>139</sup> Russia wishes



A woman views a manipulated video on Jan. 24, 2019, that changes what is said by President Donald Trump and former President Barack Obama, illustrating how deepfake technology can deceive viewers. (Rob Lever / AFP via Getty Images)

to weaken U.S. and allied military support for Ukraine, which it believes represents a strategic threat to its interests,<sup>140</sup> especially if it becomes a NATO member.

To the extent that Russia and China are actively engaged in mis/disinformation operations directed at the United States, they are likely to attempt influencing the 2024 elections. Consistent with at least some media reports, this publication assesses that both nations will attempt to influence the elections in a way that they believe will aid Trump because they see his political victory as beneficial to their key interests. Despite his bellicose rhetoric toward China, some evidence indicates that Trump is indifferent to Taiwan's security concerns and that if China were to

militarily invade the island, he may either not come to its aid or be slow to act.<sup>141</sup> As for Russia, Trump's positions on military aid to Ukraine have ranged from effectively opposing it<sup>142</sup> to being critical, but otherwise procedurally neutral,<sup>143</sup> prompting concerns that he would overtly or tacitly condone Moscow's efforts to dominate Kyiv. Moreover, large segments of his base, particularly on the far right, are also opposed to further involvement. This could put additional pressure on him to withdraw support, should he be the victor in November.<sup>144</sup>

However, consistent with the above-mentioned summary of empirical research on the effects of mis/disinformation, the authors judge that mis/disinformation likely will have a



minimal overall effect in the next 12 months. This is in significant part because of the awareness among U.S. intelligence agencies, non-governmental research entities, private tech companies, and the public at-large of foreign-run false information campaigns.

In terms of political activities based on, or weaponizing, false information to impact electoral processes and outcomes, this analysis judges that domestic actors, particularly ones motivated by far-right election denialist beliefs, pose the greatest threat to U.S. democratic procedural foundations. This is largely due to the influence of Trump (and his allies) as a booster, legitimizer, and inspiration for the production and mass dissemination of false information. It is also based on supporters, believing in election denialism and mass voter fraud conspiracies, in positions of authority and with access to electoral infrastructure.

One of the effects of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories is increasing distrust in societal institutions such as government agencies, law enforcement, courts, libraries, and the media. Many extremist individuals believe that these institutions are corrupt and are working against their interests. This lack of trust can lead to a willingness to engage in violence and criminal activity to promote their political and social grievances. False information has also contributed to ongoing extremist recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization toward violence since 2016.

This analysis anticipates there will be increased attempts by Trump supporters to disrupt or otherwise interfere with the electoral process. This can include a range of potential threats, including malicious insiders such as biased electoral officials<sup>145</sup> and far-right law enforcement actors (e.g. Constitutional Sheriffs movement supporters) who are legally vested with operating and safeguarding electoral systems, to outside agitators who will seek to intimidate or otherwise discourage the lawful right to vote. It will also extend to attempts by state and nonstate far-right actors to suppress voter registration efforts through both manipulation of the legal system and unlawful actions such as “deception and intimidation efforts.”<sup>146</sup>

Regarding political violence, any Trump indictment, potential arrest and/or criminal conviction, court ruling against, removal from the ballot, or election loss can be a trigger that causes one or more supporters to cross the threshold from law-abiding individual to violent extremist. Trump has a dedicated and passionate base of supporters who may feel strongly about defending him, especially if they believe he is being unfairly targeted or persecuted (whether such persecution is real or perceived). In such a scenario, there is a risk that some of his followers could resort to violent actions. Given the increasing digital dependence in the world, conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation are becoming mainstays online. Therefore, this publication assesses that conspiracy theories,

misinformation, and disinformation will continue to have a major influence on those extremists who choose violence to retaliate or avenge their perceived grievances in the next 12 months and beyond.

By contrast, far-left conspiracy theories and false information mixed with facts will, intentionally or not, further stoke moral outrage about the death and destruction occurring in the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. This will fuel further action to engage in real-world mobilization such as mostly nonviolent, disruptive, and occasionally destructive direct-action tactics like the occupation of public spaces and unlawful entry into college buildings. There is also a high probability that, absent some politically seismic event such as policy changes perceived as significant, moral outrage will also carry into voter behaviors among segments of the wider political left, who may either choose to vote for third party candidates or simply sit out the election. In turn, this can have a significant effect on electoral outcomes for key national races, including the presidency – particularly in places where campaigns are predicted to be highly competitive. In the event of a Trump electoral victory, a mass countermobilization by the wider political left is expected, driven by concerns about potential democratic backsliding and encroaching illiberalism. The risk of violence, including attempted fatal attacks, will significantly rise in the weeks between Election Day and Inauguration Day.



## 2024 Presidential Election

The 2024 U.S. presidential election cycle is in full swing. As is typical with any electoral season, it is a time of political organizing and mobilization. During such seasons, candidates can use fiery rhetoric to grab public attention, score political points, energize supporters, and win over undecided voters. Compared to midterms and off years, these dynamics intensify during presidential election cycles. The rhetorically heated nature of elections can exacerbate the aforementioned sociopolitical challenges posed by political polarization, social divergences over wedge issues, and confusion stemming from conspiracy theories and false information.

However, this upcoming election is projected to be especially heated considering statements previously made by political candidates, most notably Trump, who, among other things:

- stated his willingness to “act as a dictator for a day” if elected,
- explicitly stated he will consider pardoning convicted Jan. 6 insurrectionists,
- persistently maintains the 2020 election was “stolen” from him and,
- stated that the risk of political violence from his supporters “depends on the fairness of an election.”<sup>147</sup>

While maintaining his own feisty style of rhetoric, Biden has not made bombastic statements the way Trump has on domestic issues that easily lend themselves to illiberal, authoritarian, and violent interpretations. Nevertheless,

## How 2024 Impacts Extremists

What each presidential candidate’s appointment to office implies for violent extremist activity in the United States.

**Activity Level:** ▲ Increase — Static



### Democratic Party

President Joseph R. Biden (Incumbent) or Other Democratic Party Candidate

— Left-Wing Extremists

▲ Right-Wing Extremists



### Republican Party

Former President Donald J. Trump

▲ Left-Wing Extremists

▲ Right-Wing Extremists

Source: Daryl Johnson and Alejandro Beutel

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there is rapidly rising and robust discontent with his foreign policies regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict that has further inflamed moral outrage regarding the growing numbers of civilian casualties. This has created a rift on the wider political left that has led to mobilizations including lodging protest votes in Democratic Party primaries, political assemblies across the country (especially on college campuses), and occasional street violence. If recent investigative reporting is accurate, pro-Palestine activists are also planning to engage in disruptive direct-action tactics, including the possibility of instigating violence with police, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in mid-August 2024.<sup>148</sup>

As in the 2020 and 2022 election seasons, there are plenty of concerns relating to potential DVE threats during the months leading up to and after the vote in November. Social and political violence preceding the 2020 presidential election, ongoing election-related threats observed in 2020 and 2022, as well as the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection highlight the dangers of America’s current polarizing political and social climate. Such a strongly divisive climate will continue throughout 2024, into 2025 and beyond. Adversarial nation-states, such as Russia and China, will attempt to exploit some of this polarization through mis/disinformation operations.<sup>149</sup>



The political and social polarization in the U.S. has been growing for decades,<sup>150</sup> with many individuals on both sides of the political spectrum feeling deeply entrenched in their beliefs, according to media reporting.<sup>151</sup> This polarization has coincided with an increase in extremist activity and adverse behavior, with some individuals willing to engage in violence and criminal activity to promote their social and political agendas. If this polarization continues, it could enable further violence and unrest throughout the country as the 2024

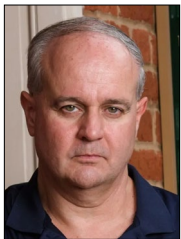
presidential election approaches and months after it concludes.

## Conclusion

The United States faces a period of increased risk of political violence and terrorism in the months leading up to the 2024 presidential election and into 2025. Although extremists on both sides of the political spectrum are mobilized and pose challenges to democracy and public safety, far-right extremists are judged to be a much greater threat

than their far-left counterparts. Threats from the far right are facilitated and enabled by at least four variables: political polarization, the upcoming 2024 national elections, the impact of divergent responses to social wedge issues, and the effects of conspiracy theories and disinformation in fueling actor mobilization. Who these actors are, along with the potential impacts of external shocks like foreign conflicts and emerging disruptive technologies, will be discussed in Part Two. □

## Biographies



**Daryl Johnson** is one of the foremost experts on domestic extremist groups in the U.S. He is a Non-Resident Fellow at the New Lines Institute.



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