

Violence and the 2020 General Election

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Abstract:

The 2020 U.S. presidential election was the most acrimonious in recent memory, with rising political animosity threatening to erupt into partisan violence. But widespread fears that voting would be violently disrupted did not materialize. While scattered incidents of violence and voter intimidation did occur throughout the early voting period and on Election Day, voting was generally orderly and safe. After Election Day, protests and agitation by supporters of losing candidate Donald Trump did not translate into broad instability or widespread partisan violence. The shocking and deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol by a pro-Trump mob on January 6 did not prevent President-Elect Joe Biden from taking office on January 20. This memo analyzes the role of violence before, during, and immediately after the 2020 election, provides a catalog of the isolated occurrences of voter intimidation and violence, and considers several explanations for why the U.S. escaped widespread election violence.

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Other Contributors: This report draws upon prior memos published by the Healthy Elections Project:

- [“Defining Voter Intimidation: Six Battleground States,”](#) Mathew Simkovits, Amanda Zerbe, Adriana Stephan, Krithika Iyer, Tom Westphal (October 8, 2020)
- [“Electoral Violence in 2020: Prevention and Potential Remedies,”](#) Krithika Iyer, Christopher Meyer, Adriana Stephan, Tom Westphal (October 8, 2020)

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I. Introduction

Violence has not been a feature of recent American elections. Americans typically vote peacefully, and political parties and candidates accept the results of the democratic process without resorting to extralegal means. Even the disputed 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush—famous for its wrangling over “hanging chads” and an eleventh-hour U.S. Supreme Court decision—was resolved without partisan violence.

The 2020 presidential election was different, as various factors began to sow the seeds of mistrust in the electoral process, and that mistrust contributed to a risk of violence higher than for any election in recent memory. Campaign rhetoric became supercharged as the election approached, threatening to [normalize](#) the idea that violence would be a legitimate response to losing. In the runup to Election Day, over 40% of both Democrats and Republicans believed that violence would be at least “[a little justified](#)” if the other party were to win the 2020 election.

As key leaders used rhetoric to inflame tensions and cast doubt on the validity of the electoral process, partisan animosity and fears of political disenfranchisement escalated. Widely propagated disinformation campaigns went viral on social media platforms, and there was partisan distrust of mainstream media coverage. Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic disrupted both the economy (with sudden rising unemployment) and election administration. And there was a looming concern over the likelihood of [foreign interference in the electoral process](#). All these factors exacerbated a [dangerous situation](#).

Given these factors, [many expected](#) partisan violence would mar the American democratic process, with tragic consequences. Experts marked electoral violence as a [clear and present danger](#) ahead of the November 2020 election. [Localized clashes and protests](#) during early voting could have sparked election disruption and violence in other parts of the country or interfered with Americans’ right to vote. The consequences could have been disastrous. Even apart from the obvious cost in human suffering, election-related violence could have undermined the democratic process by feeding into claims made by the losing campaign that the election was illegitimate and unreflective of the “true” will of the voters. In turn, an election disrupted by violence could have created political cover for extraordinary actions testing the boundaries of the nation’s constitutional system, such as [state legislators setting aside their state’s popular vote and choosing electors directly](#).

These expectations of widespread voter intimidation and violence did not materialize initially. Early voting and Election Day passed peacefully. Sporadic incidents were handled quickly and

adeptly by local authorities. The Electoral College's [December 14 vote](#) in favor of Biden for president unfolded without incident.

But losing candidate, incumbent President Trump, spread unfounded conspiracy theories and disinformation that the election had been “stolen” from him. He disputed the election results, using social media and a [barrage of lawsuits](#), even as court after court ruled against him.

And even before the election, incidents of intimidation and threats of violence occurred in parts of the country. Election officials in several states were subjected to [death threats and threats of violence](#). In Michigan, authorities foiled a [plot by a militia to storm the state capitol](#) in October and kidnap several officials, including the governor. After the election, armed [protestors descended on the home](#) of Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, targeting her as the state's chief elections officer.

For the entire nation, the semblance of peace was definitively broken on January 6. As Congress met to confirm the Electoral College vote for Biden, President Trump addressed his supporters at a rally in front of the White House. In a speech filled [with violent imagery](#), he urged his supporters to “show strength,” “fight much harder” against “bad people,” and to “stop the steal.” He went as far as to say that, if his supporters did not “fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” After rhetorically targeting Vice President Mike Pence, Trump then instructed supporters to march on the Capitol: “...we’re going to walk down, and I’ll be there with you...We are going to the Capitol...” Leaving the rally, hundreds of Trump supporters marched on the U.S. Capitol, many chanting “Hang Mike Pence.” The attackers breached police barricades and stormed into the building itself, crashing through its doors and windows. Once inside, the mob damaged the building and clashed with Capitol Police guarding the legislative chambers and patrolling the halls. The attackers eventually broke into the legislative chambers (shots were fired and glass broken) and the offices of key leaders. Lawmakers fled, were taken to “safe rooms,” or evacuated by Capitol security. The chaos temporarily disrupted the Electoral College confirmation and left four protesters and one Capitol police officer dead. President Trump, meanwhile, watched the attack unfold from the White House.

The mob attack on the Capitol shocked the nation and precipitated a swift backlash. Congress reconvened later that evening and confirmed President-elect Biden's Electoral College victory. Law enforcement—initially unprepared for the assault—commenced a nationwide hunt for the perpetrators. Social media companies booted hundreds of individuals and organizations associated with the incident off their networks, including President Trump himself. The U.S. House voted to impeach President Trump for his role in inciting the January 6 attack, making him the first U.S. President in history to be impeached twice. Security forces swarmed Washington, D.C., and were on high alert across the country in anticipation of further violence.

Further violence did not come. On January 20, President Trump vacated office and President-Elect Biden was inaugurated without incident or disruption. The 2020 election had ended with the duly elected candidate, Biden, assuming political power as the constitution stipulates.

The 2020 election presented a puzzling case study in political violence. The January 6 storming of the Capitol demonstrated the tremendous potential for violence throughout the election cycle. And yet—for all its symbolic power—it stood as an isolated, last-ditch atrocity that sparked widespread outrage and backlash but not further violence. Despite volatile conditions, rising partisan animosity, and President Trump’s willingness to sacrifice democratic norms and institutions for his personal political gain, America escaped widespread partisan violence. Why?

This report analyzes the role of violence before, during, and after the 2020 election, cataloging the isolated occurrences of voter intimidation and violence. A brief conclusion offers possible explanations of why the election proved largely peaceful and explores its potential legacy.

II. Pre-Election Day: Growing Fears

As early voting began across the country, Americans were experiencing a crisis of confidence in their democratic institutions. A [YouGov/Yahoo survey](#) from mid-September found that only 22% of Americans believed the election would be “free and fair.” President Trump’s [continuous](#) and [baseless](#) claims that the 2020 election was “[rigged](#)” against him further undermined public trust in the process—claims he had also voiced [prior to the 2016 presidential race](#), which he won. Many observers feared that violence was the inevitable result of this broad public doubt in the integrity of the election process. Former Vice President Biden gave a speech October 7, [acknowledging](#) the “country is in a dangerous place” and calling for national unity.

Fears of voter intimidation were also [prevalent](#), in part because of Trump’s directive to his supporters to “[go into the polls and watch very carefully](#).” Many prominent state officials, such as [Nevada’s attorney general](#), warned that such activities could constitute voter intimidation. The Healthy Elections Project’s [voter intimidation explainer](#) details the federal and state legal definitions for “voter intimidation.”

Limited, scattered incidents of voter intimidation *did* occur during the early voting period of the general election. On October 1, 2020, Michigan’s attorney general [charged](#) two political operatives with voter intimidation for orchestrating a series of robocalls aimed at suppressing

the vote in the November general election. These robocalls presented false and misleading information about mail-in voting, including [claims](#) that personal information submitted on mail-in ballots could be used to execute outstanding arrest warrants against voters or to collect unpaid debts. Other examples of potential intimidation during the early voting period included:

- [A Miami police officer](#) was disciplined for wearing a “Trump 2020” face mask in uniform and carrying a gun in a polling place during early voting.
- The Trump campaign [videotaped voters](#) dropping ballots off at vote-by-mail dropboxes in Philadelphia. The Pennsylvania attorney general warned that such behavior could violate the state’s voter intimidation laws.
- Republican partisans “[created a commotion](#)” at an early voting site in Fairfax County, Virginia, by waving flags, chanting partisan slogans, and making it difficult for voters to enter the polling place. Some voters reported [feeling intimidated](#) by the behavior, but the incident was ultimately resolved by the actions of local election officials. The Virginia GOP dismissed the incident, responding: “[Quick! Someone call the waaaambulance!](#)”
- Police stationed at early voting sites in Tucson, Arizona, [were removed](#) after voters complained their presence was intimidating.
- Voters in Bernalillo County, New Mexico, [complained](#) of a “Trump Train” vehicle convoy disrupting access to an early voting site. Similar events were reported in [Temecula](#), California.
- Police officers were [stationed outside early voting stations](#) in Laredo, Texas, after pro-Trump supporters were accused of harassing Democratic Party volunteers near a polling place.
- Some Florida and Alaska voters [received threatening emails](#), warning them to “Vote for Trump or else!” Many of these emails claimed to be from far-right militia group The Proud Boys, but the Department of Homeland Security pinned the emails on [Iranian interference](#).
- Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison [prevented a private security company](#) from sending private “security guards” to polling places throughout the state, announcing it would have violated state and federal voter intimidation laws.
- In Yolo, California, one voter received a [threatening note](#) left on their doorstep, warning them to cancel their voter registration.

Though such instances were troubling, they were [extremely rare and often quickly addressed](#) by local officials.

There were also limited instances of violent disruption to campaigning and the electoral process. In an incident that was videotaped and reported by national media in late October, a caravan of [pro-Trump supporters](#) surrounded and impeded the movement of a Biden

campaign bus as it was traveling down a highway in Texas. The Republican Party of Virginia's headquarters was vandalized in mid-September in what the party called "[a clear attempt to induce a sense of terror in Virginia Republicans.](#)" A North Dakota man was [arrested](#) for threatening to blow up a polling place. And in Boston, a vote-by-mail dropbox was [set on fire](#) by an arsonist, destroying dozens of ballots. But again, such incidents were rare, and early voting progressed without major disruption across the country.

III. Election Day: Calm Prevails

Despite the relative calm during the early voting period, as Election Day neared, election officials, observers, and the public became increasingly concerned about the possibility of violence. On October 28, the International Crisis Group, an organization that provides early warnings to countries in danger of falling into violent conflict, [warned](#) that the United States was at risk for political violence. A YouGov poll just before the election indicated that [56% of voters anticipated an increase in violence](#) because of the election. In late October, the *Washington Post* [reported survey data](#) showing that 15% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats said the "country would be better off if large numbers of people on the other side 'just died.'" The same [survey](#) showed 18% of Democrats and 13% of Republicans believed violence would be an acceptable response if their side lost the presidential election, and 40% of Americans saw their political opponents as "truly evil."

Fears heightened as leaders of armed right-wing organizations in Georgia [announced](#) they had "troops" ready to intervene at polling places in response to reports of election fraud. Two groups which track extremist organizations in the United States—the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and MilitiaWatch—[issued a warning](#) in late October that right-wing groups posed a "serious threat to the safety and security of American voters." ACLED experts cautioned that right-wing extremist groups had become "[more assertive](#)" in the runup to Election Day and were well-positioned to disrupt voting in key battleground states, such as Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Oregon. The ACLED pre-election [report](#) further detailed this concern.

The prospects for intimidation and violence prompted state and local officials to take unusual steps to head off Election Day violence. In Michigan, for example, the secretary of state [announced](#) a ban on openly carrying firearms at polling places. The move prompted [a backlash](#) by some Michigan county sheriffs, who challenged the secretary of state's authority to impose the ban and refused to enforce it. A [Michigan state court judge](#) subsequently struck down the ban. Police departments in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities around the country

mobilized [additional officers](#) and [prepared special contingency plans](#) to respond to election-related unrest. Philadelphia released an [anti-voter intimidation plan](#) and deployed a special task force of attorneys and detectives to follow up on voter intimidation issues. In Portland, Oregon, city officials [discussed](#) the logistics of imposing a curfew if Election Day turned violent.

Civil society groups also mobilized to prevent violence. In Cincinnati, for example, local religious leaders and social workers [participated in an effort](#) to provide trained “peacekeepers” to de-escalate polling place violence. Academic institutions also played a role: In partnership with the [Healthy Elections Project](#), the [Stanford University D. School](#) produced [resources](#) to help election workers prepare for and respond to polling place disruptions.

By Election Day, partisan tension, concerns about voter intimidation, and fears of political violence reached a fever pitch. Happily, [violence was virtually nonexistent, and reports of voter intimidation were few and far between](#). Voting progressed without significant disruption. International observers [declared](#) Election Day to be “orderly,” describing the atmosphere as “peaceful” and “without unrest or intimidation.” The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which runs a prominent national voting complaint hotline, [reported](#) that complaints of voter intimidation were “very isolated and sporadic,” and it is unclear how many of these complaints were substantiated. Some examples of incidents are collected below

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- In Surprise, Arizona, a man [repeatedly drove past](#) a polling place holding a sign saying, “Bidens Shot” [sic] in an apparent attempt to discourage and confuse voters.
- Officials in Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, Kansas, Nebraska, and New York [reported](#) that some voters received robocalls spreading misinformation about voting, including a false claim that voting had been extended into Wednesday because of long lines at the polls.
- In West Boca Raton, Florida, a poll worker [alleged](#) that pro-Trump supporters “threatened, harrassed, taunted, harangued and even physically assaulted” poll workers, turning the polling place into a “war zone.” He further alleged that police efforts were “cursory” and failed to curb the potentially intimidating behavior.

ProPublica published in-depth [reporting](#) that substantiated a handful of other voter intimidation instances. Though such reports are troubling, these events were extremely rare. Despite all warnings and fears of violence, Election Day was peaceful and orderly across the country.

IV. Post-Election Day: The Capitol Riot

In the election's aftermath, President Trump repeatedly questioned its legitimacy, while President-Elect Biden called for calm and national unity. Trump's actions encouraged his supporters to resist Biden's victory, raising the possibility of partisan violence. Pro-Trump supporters mobbed ballot counting centers, staged small-scale protests in major U.S. cities, and issued numerous death threats to election officials. Their activities culminated in the January 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol, which—though horrific—ultimately failed to disrupt the transfer of power and President Biden's inauguration. This section examines the role of violence in the post-election period.

In the days immediately following the election, while votes were still being counted in some key states, pro-Trump crowds [gathered](#) outside of ballot counting facilities in swing jurisdictions. Though many of these gatherings were acrimonious, there was no evidence they had any meaningful impact on the counting process, and they were largely non-violent. For example, in Maricopa County, Arizona, Trump supporters—including some carrying [semiautomatic rifles](#)—gathered outside a [ballot-counting facility](#), prompting the county to shut down access to the building while officials continued to count ballots inside. Similar scenes unfolded in [Las Vegas](#) and [Philadelphia](#). On November 6, police [arrested and charged](#) two armed men in Philadelphia after being tipped off that the individuals were preparing to disrupt vote counting. In Detroit, a pro-Trump crowd [briefly became](#) chaotic after election officials informed dozens of poll watchers that they could not reenter the tally room because of room capacity constraints. Those denied access began pounding on the doors and windows of the center, shouting “Let us in” and “Stop the count.” Though the gatherings outside ballot counting centers were unusual compared to previous years, they did not significantly disrupt the vote counting process.

The gatherings at vote counting centers were accompanied by relatively [small protests and counter-protests](#) around the country, including in the cities of Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and San Diego. In most cases, they proceeded without major incident, though some protests devolved into chaos. In Portland, Oregon, the governor [called in the National Guard](#) to control protesters and counter-protesters who destroyed property and looted businesses.

One of the largest [pro-Trump rallies](#)—labeled the “Million MAGA March” by its organizers—occurred in Washington, D.C., on the weekend of November 14. [Several thousand supporters attended](#), including conspiracy devotees and participants from well-organized far-right extremist groups. Though largely peaceful during the day, Trump supporters clashed with

counter-protesters throughout the night near the White House. At least [one person was stabbed](#), and two police officers were injured.

Prominent Republican leaders encouraged the protesters with [violent, warlike rhetoric](#). Former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn told pro-Trump supporters in D.C. that Republicans were [“waging a battle across America.”](#) The Arizona Republican Party [retweeted a right-wing activist’s promise](#) to die for Trump and challenged other Arizona Republicans to make a similar pledge. A Washington State representative called on Republicans to [“prepare for war,”](#) describing President-Elect Biden’s election victory as a “coup.” Democrats—including the Biden campaign itself, which continuously described the election as a [“battle for the soul of the nation”](#)—deployed rhetoric, but its use was also tempered by calls for unity and calm, particularly during the post-election period.

As the protests unfolded, media reported a large increase in [death threats directed at election officials](#), a phenomenon that became common in jurisdictions around the country. The threats targeted officials from both parties. Some of these incidents are described below:

- Pro-Trump protesters [harassed](#) Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs outside her home, chanting, “We are watching you” and threatening to kill the Democrat’s family.
- Georgia’s Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and his wife [received threats](#), saying he “deserved to face a firing squad” and warning him: “You better not botch this recount. Your life depends on it.” About 200 pro-Trump protesters also staged a protest [rally](#) outside his home.
- In Gwinnett County, Georgia, a 20-year-old voting machine technician [received death threats](#) after someone posted a video of him on the internet that showed him conducting a routine procedure but claimed it showed him manipulating recount data. Similar threats were directed at an [Atlanta ballot processing worker](#) who was captured on video discarding an instruction sheet that a voter had mistakenly returned with their absentee ballot. Someone posted the video on Twitter and purported that it showed the worker destroying ballots. Georgia election officials have since confirmed that the posted video depicted legal and routine behavior related to the recount.
- The Vermont secretary of state’s office received [threatening calls](#), warning they would be executed by a firing squad.
- The Washington State elections director Lori Augino’s [picture appeared on a “kill list”](#) website, along with her home address, a photo of her house, and her email address. Augino and her family [went into hiding](#). The FBI later [announced](#) that the website was created by Iranian-linked entities attempting to incite violence against U.S. officials.
- In Michigan, the Republican chairperson of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers [received threatening emails](#), after she initially refused to certify the election’s results.

The emails contained images of dead women and included threats against her daughter.

- Armed protesters [chanted obscenities](#) outside the home of Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson.
- Employees of Dominion Voting Systems, the provider of voting machines for many jurisdictions throughout the country, went [into hiding](#) after receiving countless death threats. The threats repeated conspiracy theories that Dominion’s machines were part of a plot to throw the election to Biden. Dominion voting machines were used in [28 states](#), including the key swing states of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.
- [Unspecified threats](#) to Michigan’s presidential electors for Biden prompted Michigan to close public access to the state Capitol building on November 14.

As of January 20, no election officials had been physically harmed. But the threats are a concerning development that underscores the growing volatility of the election process in some parts of the country and that may [portend future violence](#).

[Small-scale, pro-Trump protests continued](#) through December, with the defeated president’s supporters vowing not to recognize President-Elect Biden’s legitimacy. While these protests were largely peaceful, they occasionally lapsed into localized violence. Over the weekend of December 12, for example, pro-Trump supporters—including sizeable contingents from extremist groups like the “Proud Boys” and QAnon conspiracy believers—[gathered in Washington D.C.](#) Clashes between those supporters and counter-protesters left four people with stab wounds and eight police officers injured. D.C. Police Chief Peter Newsham [reported](#) that it appeared protesters from both sides were responsible for instigating some portion of the clashes. Police launched an investigation into pro-Trump supporters for [hate crimes and vandalism](#) directed against historically black churches in the District. D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser [described the violence](#) as a “symptom of this hateful rhetoric” from “people who refuse to accept the results of a fair American election.”

Pro-Trump protest rallies culminated on January 6, when thousands of President Trump’s supporters, many armed with weapons, stormed the U.S. Capitol building in an attempt to halt Congress’ certification of the Electoral College vote for Biden. The hours-long siege stunned the nation and the world, as detailed media coverage captured the attack as it unfolded:

- The full text of President Trump’s rally speech to supporters, beckoning them to march on the Capitol and “fight like hell,” is available [here](#).
- [NPR’s event timeline](#).

- *Washington Post's* [multimedia presentation](#) incorporating photographs and video of the incident.
- *New York Times'* [event timeline](#).
- ProPublica's [library of over 500 images and videos](#) from the attack.
- [The New Yorker's coverage](#) from a reporter inside the Capitol at the time of the attack.

The attack resulted in five deaths, [including that of a Capitol police officer](#). The pro-Trump mob did not stop Congress' certification of the election results; Congress reconvened after the building was secured and swiftly confirmed President-Elect Biden's victory. Over 100 Republican lawmakers voted against certification.

[Evidence and witness testimony](#) presented in February during Congressional hearings about the January 6 attack suggested that the attackers included a large number of people from white supremacist groups. It also indicated the attacks were inspired and encouraged by Republican political leaders, ranging from state house representatives to President Trump himself. The extent to which Republican leaders played a role in its organization remains unclear. Emerging evidence shows that [multiple people connected to the Trump campaign](#) helped procure the rally's permits and organize the event. Some U.S. House Democrats called for [an investigation into "suspicious" Capitol tours](#) given in the days preceding the attack. They theorized that Republican lawmakers and/or staffers may have actually been leading "reconnaissance tours" for those later involved in the attack—suggesting that the attack was premeditated and facilitated by some Republican leaders.

The Capitol attack largely overshadowed several related incidents on January 6. Also in Washington, D.C., on January 6, [pipe bombs were discovered and dismantled](#) at the headquarters of both the Republican and Democratic national committees. In more than a [dozen state capitals](#), pro-Trump protesters gathered to denounce the Electoral College results and threaten state officials. In Washington State, protesters—some armed—[stormed the exterior gates of the governor's mansion](#) but did not make it inside the building itself. Trump supporters in Oregon [burned an effigy of Democratic Governor Kate Brown](#), and Oregon state troopers arrested a man for attempting to enter the state capitol with a firearm. In Arizona, about 1,000 Trump supporters [erected a guillotine](#) outside the state capitol. Government complexes in [Utah, New Mexico, Texas, and Georgia closed](#) in response to protests.

The consequences of the attacks have been dramatic and varied and have included the following:

- Federal officials launched a massive law enforcement manhunt to find and arrest participants of the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. [Some of the perpetrators were](#)

[quickly](#) and easily identified because of their unique attire and frequent appearances on videos taken by other participants and security cameras. As of March 2021, over 300 participants in the attack had been arrested and federally charged, [and there were 540 open investigations](#).

- Following the breach of The Capitol by rioters, over [25,000 National Guard soldiers](#) were placed around the Capitol building and in the surrounding downtown areas. The security precautions helped prevent further violence and led to multiple arrests. On January 7, a QAnon conspiracy theorist who had [driven a truck loaded with weapons](#) from Colorado to D.C. was arrested after threatening elected officials, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. On January 16, Capitol police [arrested](#) a man at a security checkpoint who was carrying a gun and an ‘unauthorized’ credential for the January 20 inauguration. [Multiple similar incidents](#) took place in the days that followed.
- [State governments placed law enforcement on high alert](#) to address any potential for additional violence during the inauguration. Police officers and National Guard troops hastily fortified state legislature buildings and other government complexes around the country. On January 17, small groups of pro-Trump protesters [gathered outside several state houses](#) but were dispersed without violence.
- Criticism over U.S. Capitol security failures led to the [resignations](#) of the Capitol police chief and the House and Senate sergeants-at-arms. Congress and federal law enforcement agencies have launched [sweeping investigations](#) into the failures.
- The January 6 attack highlighted the potential that extremists could infiltrate the ranks of police and military. Investigations estimated that almost [30 military](#) and [law enforcement](#) officers participated in the January 6 attack, prompting the FBI to [vet National Guard members](#) assigned to protect the inauguration ceremony January 20.
- Social media companies took more aggressive actions to dismantle networks of right-wing agitators and Republican leaders—including President Trump—on their platforms. Their efforts appeared to be working: [An initial study shows that online misinformation about election fraud dropped 73%](#) after their accounts were suspended. But right-wing groups have now [migrated to encrypted messaging services](#), making their activities less visible to potential new recruits but more difficult to monitor.
- On January 13, the U.S. House of Representatives [voted to impeach former President Trump](#) for inciting the January 6 violence and insurrection, making him the only U.S. President in history to be impeached twice. The U.S. Senate voted [57 to 43](#) to find Trump guilty, but a two-thirds majority is required to convict.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol building shocked the nation and carried immense symbolic power. Though it is difficult to predict how the attack’s consequences will continue to unfold, it seems destined to become a dramatic moment in American politics.

The January 6 Capitol attack marked the zenith of violent activity during the 2020 presidential election. On January 20, President Trump vacated office and President-elect Biden was inaugurated without incident. Ultimately, the 2020 election resulted in a profoundly scarred, but peaceful, transfer of political power.

V. Conclusion

The 2020 election presents a puzzling case study in political violence. In a country where mass shootings are common, a hotly contested, acrimonious election did not devolve into widespread violence at the polls. Despite [violent rhetoric and growing partisan animosity](#), widespread voter intimidation did not materialize. Early voting and Election Day voting proceeded peacefully. Angry crowds surrounded ballot counting facilities, but they did not interfere with the counting process. Election officials across the country received death threats, but none were physically harmed. Protesters and counter-protestors engaged in clashes, but the conflicts were limited in number and relatively small in scope. Republican officials encouraged supporters to challenge the presidential election's outcome, but none were successful in overturning the results. Protesters stormed the U.S. Capitol, killing five, but the attack did not achieve the attackers' goal of stopping the transfer of power. In short: The 'warning signs' were all flashing, but the voting process played out in a largely peaceful manner, and the government institutions were sufficiently strong to resist attack.

There is no clear answer to explain how the 2020 presidential voting was able to succeed despite what many called the clear and present dangers to democracy. Several explanations are plausible. One explanation could be simply that the warnings of nationwide violence were overblown. Violent rhetoric from partisan leaders and supporters could have simply been hot-headed hyperbole. Acrimonious protests do not necessarily imply people are willing to take unlawful actions. Though the isolated clashes were violent, their relatively small scale and the fact that radical fringe groups like the "Proud Boys" were the driving force of such gatherings—rather than more mainstream GOP supporters—underscore the lack of widespread, normalized partisan violence.

Another possible explanation is that events before and after Election Day lowered the stakes of the election results and therefore reduced the value of violent opposition. Though Republicans lost the presidency, they improved their numbers in the [U.S. House](#) and retained a newly minted majority on the U.S. Supreme Court. U.S. Supreme Court Justice [Ruth Bader Ginsburg's](#) death in September and the swift confirmation of Justice [Amy Coney Barrett](#) solidified a conservative majority on the Supreme Court for the foreseeable future. Justice Barrett's

confirmation further consolidated the [influence of Republican-appointed judges](#) throughout the federal judiciary. Until Georgia's January 5 runoff election for two U.S. Senate seats—held the day before the Capitol attack—Republicans maintained control of the U.S. Senate. At the state level, Republicans continued to hold a majority of [gubernatorial seats](#) and [state legislatures](#). These factors combined may have convinced Republicans their policy priorities were still significant and secure. Such robust representation may have made it 'safer' for Republicans to lose the presidency and reduced any potential value of violent opposition.

The actions of individual actors may have also played a role. On November 7, as his electoral lead widened, President-Elect Biden used [a widely broadcast speech](#) to appeal for calm and unity, reminding Americans that, though "[w]e may be opponents, [] we're not enemies." At the local and state levels, this call was echoed by officials from [both parties](#), who assured their constituents that the [electoral process was working](#) and asked for [patience](#). President-Elect Biden continued to reinforce these themes through the post-election period and devoted most of his [inauguration speech](#) to an impassioned call for unity. These appeals may have calmed tensions at a critical time.

Republican officials may also have retained some hope in their future ability to win elections, thus reducing the appeal of resorting to violent opposition. Proclivity for violence against democratic systems is highest when an election's losers do not believe there is any value in working within the bounds of the democratic system. Republican leaders, who hold a majority of state elected offices, increased their share of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and lost two U.S. Senate only by the slimmest of margins. They may believe their political future was bright and, therefore, had no need to risk open violence. And President Trump announced his intention to return "[in some form](#)" to politics.

A more optimistic explanation: U.S. institutions worked. State and local officials planned for and handled emerging controversies. Election officials overcame daunting challenges and ran a technically sound, orderly election. President Trump and his supporters railed against the electoral process but were willing, at least initially, to work within normal institutional procedures to challenge it, filing [numerous](#) lawsuits. When those lawsuits failed, their efforts to overturn the election lost legitimacy and were abandoned by key Republican officials—including Vice President Mike Pence—splitting the party. Key Republican secretaries of state and legislators rejected President Trump's efforts to overturn the will of the voters.

Some combination of these explanations may partially explain why the 2020 election remained relatively peaceful. But a final possible factor might be simply luck. Given the same circumstances, it is plausible to think that more violence could well have transpired. A slightly different course of events—a political leader's provocative comment, revelations of foreign

interference at a key moment, an inflammatory video broadcast on social media, an accidental discharge of a firearm in a polling place or at a crowded protest—could easily have spiraled into more significant chaos and violence. And had evacuations of Congressional leaders been delayed, or if the evacuation of those leaders had been intercepted by the January 6 mob, the attack on the U.S. Capitol building could have resulted in the death of Congressional members, even the vice president, potentially upending the American democratic process.

Though the 2020 election itself was more peaceful than many anticipated, it still leaves behind a troubling legacy. Election officials and their families faced death threats and increasingly acrimonious encounters with the public they serve. Former President Trump’s continuous and baseless claims of fraud may undermine public faith in the democratic system for decades to come. Polling done a week after the January 6 attack showed that [21% of Republicans approved of the attack on the U.S. Capitol](#) and fully half said they would describe the insurrectionists as “defending freedom.” More than 80% of Republicans also said they [did not blame President Trump](#) for the violence. The insurrectionists’ “success” at delaying Congress’ certification of the 2020 presidential election [raised the profile of right-wing militia groups](#), potentially fueling their future recruitment efforts. Though the U.S. dodged political violence this time, declining public trust in the electoral process and rising partisan rancor does not bode well for future stability.

The 2020 election demonstrated that the erosion of democratic norms for the personal political gains of politicians can have violent consequences. Whether or not America has learned this lesson in time to avoid future violence and division remains to be seen.