What Can Political Science Tell Us About the Risk of Civil War in the United States?

J. Michael Greig, Ph.D.
Department of Political Science
University of North Texas
Vital Facts

- Joe Biden is the legitimately elected president of the United States
- There is no evidence of voter fraud or irregularities on a scale sufficient to change the results of the November 2020 election
- The violence at the U.S. Capitol was an insurrection that sought to overturn the results of the November 2020 election
- The violence at the U.S. Capitol was conducted by individuals who sought to disrupt the constitutional process for the election of the U.S. president
- There is no constitutional mechanism for Former President Trump to become president without winning the November 2024 election
Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, 1838

• “At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it?-- Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never!--All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.”

• “At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”
How much do you agree with the following statement: “I’m concerned that the U.S. could be on the verge of another Civil War.”

- Strongly agree: 40%
- Somewhat agree: 21%
- Somewhat disagree: 16%
- Strongly disagree: 23%

n=494, Back to Normal Barometer, Sept. 23, 2020
I'm concerned that the U.S. could be on the verge of another Civil War.

- Very liberal: 52%
- Somewhat liberal: 33%
- Moderate: 34%
- Somewhat conservative: 35%
- Very conservative: 52%

n=498, Back to Normal Barometer, Sept. 23, 2020
Key Types of Civil War

- Conventional – direct confrontation among parties
- Irregular – insurgents largely avoid direct confrontation
  - Ambush
  - Isolated attacks
- Symmetric non-conventional – low capacity on both sides
Forms of Civil Violence

- Civil unrest – limited political violence
  - Individual assassinations
  - Individual acts of terrorism
  - Riots
- State terror – unilateral use of violence by the government against its people to force compliance
- One-sided violence
- Genocide & ethnic cleansing – physical elimination of a people from a territory
  - Can involve reciprocal efforts
- Coup
- Civil war
Syria: 2015
Yemen: 2020
Sarajevo: 1984
Sarajevo: Post-1995
# Myanmar 2021 Coup & Protests

![Graph showing the number of arrests, killings, and detention](aappb.org/coup)

## Day 123 | 03 June

- **845** Killed
- **5652** Arrested
- **4509** Still Detained
- **1931** Warrants Out

*Photo: Mg Oo Kyi, killed on 2 June in Pakokku township. Arrests include charges of resisting. Those arrested and killed are connected to the attempted military coup only; arrests with quick release not included.*
What Is a Coup?

• A form of political violence

• "the sudden and irregular (i.e., illegal or extra-legal) removal, or displacement, of the executive authority of an independent government." - Coup D'état Project at the University of Illinois’ Cline Center for Advanced Social Research

• Requirements for a coup:
  1. “There must be some person or persons who initiated the coup.”
  2. “The target of the coup must have meaningful control over national policy.”
  3. “There must be a credible threat to the leaders' hold on power.”
  4. “Illegal or irregular means must be used to seize, remove, or render powerless the target of the coup.”
  5. “It must be an organized effort.”
Washington: January 6, 2021
What Was January 6th?

• “Using the Cline Center’s Coup D’état Project definitions, the storming of the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 was an attempted coup d’état: an organized, illegal attempt to intervene in the presidential transition by displacing the power of the Congress to certify the election. Specifically, at the time of this writing, we classify it as an attempted dissident coup.”
Essentials of a Democracy

• Acceptance that disagreements are resolved within the political sphere

• Agreement that losers accept loss & return to fight another day
  • Adjust positions
  • Develop new programs and ideological ideas
  • Better communicate

• Parties must believe that future prospects are better even when losing in a democracy than future prospects in a non-democracy

• When these essentials breakdown, both democracy and civil society breakdown
Red Flags for Civil Conflict in the U.S.

- Political polarization
- Distrusted political institutions
- Legitimization of violence
- Armed non-state actors
- High stakes elections
- Irresponsible political leaders
- Information bubbles & misinformation – role of social media
The State of American Politics
Majorities of Trump, Biden voters say they have ‘just a few’ or no friends who support the other candidate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of registered voters who say __ of their close friends support the ...</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Just a few</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Same candidate they do for president</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump supporters</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biden supporters</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other major party’s candidate for president</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump supporters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biden supporters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on registered voters.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
Older voters are more likely to say a lot of their close friends share their candidate preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Among Trump supporters</th>
<th>Among Biden supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot of friends who support Trump</td>
<td>No friends who support Biden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 18-34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coll grad+</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some coll</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS or less</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Based on registered voters. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 27-Aug. 2, 2020.
Vaccination Rate by 2020 Election Outcome (CDC & NPR)
Trust in Government

Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021

Public trust in government remains low. Only about one-quarter of Americans say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (22%).

Public trust in government near historic lows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coast</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CLICK AND DRAG IN THE PLOT AREA TO ZOOM IN

Moving average | Individual polls

Trust in Government
Trust in Government

Chart showing trust in government over time, with data points for different presidents.
Support for: “The 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump” (Reuters/IPSOS 4/2021)
Support for: “The people who gathered at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 were mostly peaceful, law-abiding Americans” (Reuters/IPSOS 4/2021)
Support for: “The Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol was led by violent left-wing protestors trying to make Trump look bad” (Reuters/IPSOS 4/2021)
• 26% of Trump supporters & 21% of Trump opponents condoned the potential use of violence in response to an electoral victory by the other side

• If the other side engages in violence first:
  • 46% of Trump supporters & 36% of Trump opponents condone the use of violence
Predictors of Pro-Violence Attitudes Among Americans (Mason & Kalnoe, 2020)

• Best predictor:
  • Personality – people who report getting into fights, arguing frequently, and getting angry easily

• 2nd best predictor:
  • Strong party identification

• “Partisan moral engagement” is a strong influence on willingness to support the use of political violence
  • Is the other side morally wrong or evil?
Take-Aways

- American society is increasingly polarized politically
- Trust in government among political partisans is at a decades low
- Many Americans see conditions under which violence would be acceptable in U.S. politics
- Americans disagree on fundamental facts
Catalysts for Political Violence in the U.S.
Activity of Militia and Armed Groups (5/20-10/20) – From ACLED
Political Leadership & Political Urgency

• “Let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the State, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world” – President Ronald Reagan on the Soviet Union

• “They want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country as we know it.” – President Donald Trump on Democrats

• Emergence of the Flight 93 election

• Impact of dehumanization
  • Fear is a powerful source of political violence
What Would an American Civil War Look Like?
Civil War
Social Media
Meme
2020 Results – Electoral College Map
2020 Results – County Level

- Denton County – 2020
  - Trump – 222,480 (53.2%)
  - Biden – 188,695 (45.1%)
2020 Results – County Vote Margin
What Would A U.S. Civil War Look Like?

• Unlikely to see something that looks like the 19th century American Civil War

• More likely to see frequent occurrence of diffuse violence by militant groups against one another and responses from security forces. Examples:
  • Troubles in Northern Ireland
  • Israel
  • Colombia
Mitigating Factors for a U.S. Civil War

- Strength of political institutions
- Decentralized political systems
- Non-partisan security forces
- Prosperity & opportunity costs
- Geography
Mitigating Factors for Civil War in the U.S.

- Geography
  - High urbanization, but low urban concentration
  - U.S. population scattered among 65 large cities
  - New York City: 7% of U.S. urban population
  - Seoul: 60% of South Korea’s urban population
  - Paris: 25 of France’s urban population

- Why does this matter?
  - High urban concentration causes government authority to be concentrated, peripheral areas become more disconnected
  - Increases grievances & it becomes easier for rebels to mobilize
What Types of Violence Are Most Likely in the U.S.?

- Violence by extremist groups
- Violence by “accelerationist” groups & individuals
- Chief danger: recurrent, low-level political violence
Impact of Sustained Low-Level Political Violence

• Civilian casualties
• Economic harm
• Erosion of American democracy
  • Quality of governance undermined
    • Citizens deterred from voting
    • Civil servants deterred from doing their jobs
  • Normalization of political violence
  • Endogeneity effect
Scenarios for U.S. Political Violence

• Motivated lone wolf violence
  • 2017 congressional baseball shooting
  • 2021 California pipe bombs
    • “I want to blow up a democratic building so bad” ... “The democrats need to pay”

• Extremist group violence
  • Wolverine Watchmen Michigan kidnapping plot

• Accelerationist violence
  • Organized extremist groups engage in violence in the midst of a protest
  • Escalatory behavior
  • Tit-for-tat violence

• Failure of the political system
  • 2020 in 2024
What Can We Do To Avoid Civil Conflict?

• Politics is not baseball

• Strengthen democratic institutions

• Make elections less decisive

• Civic engagement/prioritize local over national politics

• Fight misinformation

• Shared challenges
If I Had a Magic Wand ...

• Significant criminal penalties for engagement in political violence

• Investment in civic education

• Electoral reform
  • Ranked choice voting and/or nonpartisan blanket primary

• Non-legislative drawing of Congressional districts

• Empathy