



Extremist Movements in the U.S: Impact on the Election and Future Administration

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The deepening social and political polarisation of the U.S. has led to a significant rise in violence, especially by extreme right-wing (XRW) movements. Regardless of the results of the upcoming presidential elections, this creates the potential for large protests and riots. In this context, foreign policy issues will be pushed aside in the first few weeks after the inauguration of the next administration in January.

Character of Extremist Movements. Between 1994 and 2019 there were 893 racially or religiously motivated terror-style attacks in the U.S. About 70 attacks or criminal plots ultimately thwarted by law enforcement were noted last year. Perpetrators motivated by XRW ideologies were responsible for the majority (44) of these incidents.

The right-wing movement is composed of about 940 groups. The FBI estimates that of these, extremist organisations, loose factions and movements have comprised about 55% since 2017. They support the constitutional right to bear arms and often openly declare their readiness to use physical violence in achieving their goals. However, deep differences exist between them. Neo-Nazi and alt-right groups like the Proud Boys promote racist and anti-immigrant views, especially towards Latinos and Muslims, or sexual minorities. They specifically seek to stop the social and cultural changes taking place in the U.S. stemming in part from immigration while also combating socio-political ideas and trends they deem progressive or leftist ("liberal"). The Proud Boys, specifically, number several hundred members in branches in 28 states (especially in the South and West) and abroad (for example, in Canada). Other groups, like the Oath Keepers (30,000 members), constitute armed militias that consist largely of former soldiers or police officers. These groups have increasingly turned their attention toward "domestic" enemies — leftist movements and liberal local governments.

There also exist considerable loosely organised factions functioning primarily thanks to internet platforms and social media. For example, the Boogaloo Boys, who hold strong

anti-state views and declare the aim of provoking riots, especially during protests by liberals, with the intent of causing another civil war in the U.S. Another group that has gained popularity in the last year and further mobilises the wider XRW milieu is QAnon, which believes in a global conspiracy associated with the Democratic Party, the so-called Deep State, and satanic paedophilia rituals.

The goals of leftist groups in the U.S., including anti-fascists (antifa) and anarchists, are mainly combating discrimination and violence against racial minorities. These organisations do not shy from physical violence against riot police during demonstrations and vandalism (e.g., graffiti) as means of political resistance, as seen during protests in Portland and Seattle in May and June. Yet, there are only a few armed militias amongst them, unlike the XRW groups. Consequently, only four incidents or terror-style plots perpetrated by leftists were recorded in the U.S. in 2019.

Reducing the XRW presence in the public debate is the goal of antifa, a decentralised grouping of cells of 5-15 members, usually in large cities. These individuals often hold liberal or leftist views and this year have frequently protested against systemic racism towards Black people as part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement. BLM arose after a series of killings of Black people by police officers in 2014–2020. The movement aims for deep criminal justice reform, including cutting the financing of the militarism of police and eliminating brutality by implementing systemic changes, for example, by increasing the accountability of individual police officers. In polling, about 63% of Americans support BLM's goals. Structurally, the movement is decentralised with

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branches in major cities. However, a growing side effect of the BLM protests has been physical violence towards especially riot police and right-wing protesters, along with property damage.

Candidate's Positions. The attitudes of Donald Trump and Joe Biden to the right- and left-wing movements are also extreme. The president avoids clearly condemning XRW groups since they constitute a part of his electorate. His positions on law enforcement, the constitutional right to bear arms, and immigration to the U.S. mobilise the XRW. Trump also narrowly interprets American history, particularly [the Civil War period](#), as a state's rights issue and resists criticism involving a racial context (slavery). In turn, leftist movements are portrayed by him and his campaign as threatening America. Trump declares that the left aims to instigate riots and attack federal buildings and law enforcement. He also suggests that states in which Democrats govern cannot cope with the protests nor the violence frequently accompanying them. For Trump, associating leftist protests to violence has been more important in addressing his supporters than talking about the COVID-19 pandemic. To that end, Trump significantly broadened the scope of activities of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) by sending federal units to cities with significant BLM protests and antifa presence over the objections of local officials.

The president's aggressive rhetoric against restrictions connected to the pandemic has included calling to "liberate" states with Democratic governors, which has contributed to right-wing protests that sometimes turned violent with leftist protesters. During manifestations in North Carolina, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio, right-wing groups initiated several incidents. In October 2020, a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan by an XRW group loosely associated with the Boogaloo movement, and anti-lockdown protesters, was foiled.

Biden, on the other hand, condemns the activities of all extremist groups, both the Proud Boys and antifa, while criticising Trump for fuelling tensions. The Democratic candidate supports the BLM's anti-racism goals but does not agree with "defunding" or similar deep reforms called for by [progressive politicians of the party](#).

Influence on the Elections. The elections on 3 November will mobilise both right- and left-wing movements. Trump has

signalled rather openly that he will likely challenge the election results in several key states, claiming that the security and credibility of voting by mail are low. Given the record number of "mail-in" votes cast (about 40% of total votes in 2016), stemming from voters' apprehensions about COVID-19 and probability of long waiting times at polls on Election Day, Trump may strive to have them rejected via Republican state leaders or courts in states that would give him the lead. At the same time, he has called on his supporters to "patrol" polling places to prevent fraud. The Republican Party plans on spending around \$20 million on Election Day monitoring, including recruiting 50,000 poll watchers, particularly in large cities in key states. Given Trump's appeal with armed XRW, they may be seen at polling places, something that could lead to violence during the election.

Post-Election Perspective. A prolonged process of declaring a winner and the expectation that Trump and the Republicans will challenge many votes and results may lead to nation-wide protests, including by leftist groups such as antifa and BLM. Counter-protests by XRW groups, including armed militias, is also likely. This will raise the potential for riots or other violence or property damage, which could be more widespread than seen in June 2020. It cannot be excluded that Trump will threaten to use U.S. military forces (based on the 1807 Insurrection Act, which was last employed in the 1992 riots in Los Angeles) to suppress the post-election protests, and that may add to the tensions in the country.

The protests are unlikely to wane once a winner is announced. Presumably, they will continue in the event Trump is successful in challenging the results and is re-elected (through the Electoral College system). On the other hand, in the event of a Biden victory, XRW may protest it as a "stolen election", using the rhetoric of Trump. For this reason, the period of internal instability in the U.S. may even last at least several weeks after the inauguration of the next administration. This will limit the U.S. interest and willingness to react to international crises and diminish foreign policy in the short term. Concurrently, Trump may engage in abrupt political initiatives aimed at turning attention away from the internal situation by checking the loyalty of U.S. allies.