

MARCH 2024

Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker: March 2024 Update

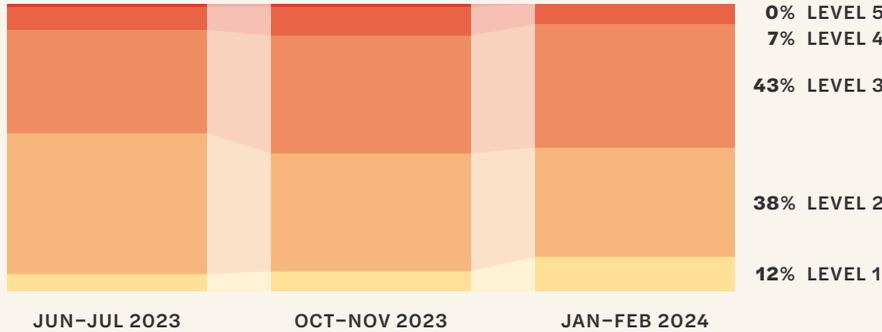
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March 2024 Update at a Glance

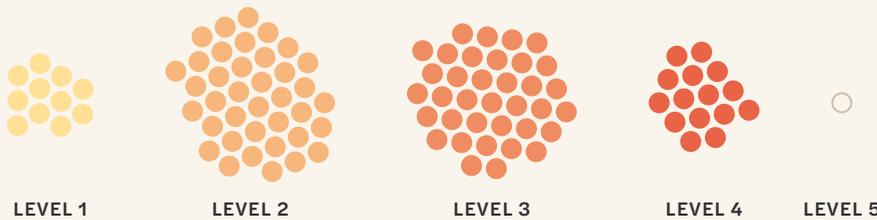
- IMPACT LEVELS**
- 1** Well-functioning democracy
 - 2** Atypical effects, but no imminent threat of breakdown
 - 3** Significant erosion of democratic quality, risk of future breakdown
 - 4** Critical effects, risk of imminent breakdown
 - 5** System is non-democratic

Impact on Democracy Distribution of expert ratings of the overall impact of violence



50% of experts rated the current overall impact of violence on U.S. democracy at a level 3 or higher, reflecting “significant erosion.”

Impact on Elections

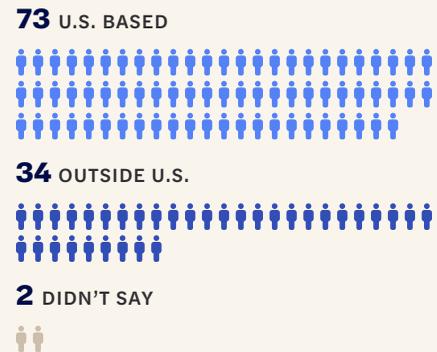


51% of experts place the impact of violence on elections at a level 3 or higher, at risk of future breakdown.

Top Expert Concerns

- Threats Against Public Officials
- Breakdown of Institutions & Social Norms
- Donald Trump and Supporters of his Authoritarian Approach
- Threats to Freedom of Expression/Right to Protest
- Violence Directed at the Electoral Process

About the Experts



The Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT) is a quarterly expert survey that evaluates the impact that political violence is having on eight distinct pillars of democracy in the United States: **freedoms of (1) expression and (2) association; (3) access to the vote; (4) election administration; (5) equality before the law; (6) individual liberties; and the independence of the (7) judiciary and (8) legislature.** Impact is gauged across 5 levels — with 1 being the lowest level of impact and 5 being the highest. VDIT also gathers insights from experts on the most concerning trends.

Main Takeaways

- Concern about the overall impact of political violence on U.S. democracy was consistent with prior waves, dropping slightly between October and January from 2.56 to 2.46.
- Among the eight pillars of democratic health tracked by VDIT, election processes remain the area of highest concern to experts. The pillar with the greatest change was legislative constraints on the executive, whose average impact score rose from 1.90 to 2.11 between October and January.
- In evaluating the impact of political violence, respondents were thinking most about the effects of intimidation, with seven out of ten reporting that they were thinking about it “a lot” or “a great deal” in making their impact assessments.
- Respondents identified Threats to Public Officials, the Breakdown of Institutions and Social Norms, Donald Trump and Supporters of his Authoritarian Approach, Threats to Freedom of Expression/Right to Protest, and Violence Directed at the Electoral Process as their top concerns.

Overall Impact

In its third edition, VDIT indicates that the impact of political violence on American democracy remained largely consistent.¹ The average assessment of overall impact was 2.46, with half of respondents assessing the impact as falling at a Level 2 or below and the other half assessing the impact as a Level 3 or 4. Once again, very few experts rated the impact as falling into the most severe categories. Only 7% of respondents rated the impact at a Level 4 and none assessed the overall impact as reaching a Level 5. This indicates

that while many experts expressed concern about the possibility of democratic breakdown due to political violence, very few viewed it as imminent.

Respondents also continued to think more about intimidation than other aspects of political violence. In evaluating the impact of political violence on the pillars of democracy, 71% of respondents indicated that they were thinking about intimidation or indirect threats “a lot” or “a great deal” compared to 61% thinking about direct threats and 47% about physical harm.

Eight Pillars of Democracy

- Freedom of Expression
- Freedom of Association
- Voting Access
- Election Processes
- Equality Before the Law
- Protection of Individual Liberties
- Judicial Constraints on the Executive
- Legislative Constraints on the Executive

Impact Across Democratic Pillars

Among the eight pillars of democratic practice that VDIT tracks, election processes again remained the area of highest concern to experts, with a mean score of 2.55 and a median rating of Level 3. The distribution of expert responses was roughly comparable to prior waves of the tracker, with 51% of respondents rating the impact of violence at a Level 3 or higher for elections.

Though there were not major changes in most other pillars of the VDIT tracker from the prior edition, there were several pillars that saw modest movement. Concerns about freedom of association dropped slightly, to a mean of 2.05 from the prior

¹ Wave 3 of the survey was sent to 867 individual experts between January 17th and February 5th, 2024, including 59 who were newly qualified into the panel based on new publications between July and October of 2023. Of these, 572 opened the e-mail and 109 completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 12.6%, and a response rate of 19% among those who opened the invitation email.

edition's 2.16. On average, experts also expressed heightened concern about the impact of political violence on judicial constraints on the executive (increasing from 1.85 in October to 1.96 in January) and legal equality before the law (increasing from 2.14 in October to 2.27 in January). The largest change was an increase in the experts' assessment of impact on legislative constraints on the executive, which jumped from a mean rating of 1.90 to 2.11 on the tracker's 5-point scale. While most respondents still evaluated the impact of political violence on legislative constraints as being minimal, the percentage of respondents who indicated concerns that this element of democracy had eroded to the point of an elevated risk of democratic breakdown rose from 18% to 35%.

Top 5 Areas of Concern

As with prior editions of VDIT, respondents were asked to identify the aspect of political violence in the United States that concerns them the most. The responses to this wave of the survey were similar to prior waves in expressing a mix of concerns. Some respondents noted the impact of broad forces such as polarization and the breakdown of social norms, others expressed more specific concerns about former President Trump and his supporters, and others concerns about the impact of violence on certain pillars of democratic practice.

New this quarter was an elevated concern about threats to public officials, with respondents most frequently citing concerns about threats to officials such as legislators, members of the judiciary, and election officials. Several respondents made specific references to concerns about threats to Republican legislators (including threats stemming from the right) and potential flashpoints related to legal proceedings involving former President Donald Trump. These are consistent with the rise in

Top 5 Concerns

- Threats against public officials
- Breakdown of institutions and social norms
- Donald Trump and supporters of his authoritarian approach
- Threats to freedom of expression/right to protest
- Violence directed at the electoral process

impact assessments related to judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, as well as recent media coverage of such threats.

Respondents also for the first time identified concerns about threats to freedom of speech and protest as among the highest categories of concern. Consistent with respondents' impact ratings, violence directed at the electoral process was among the top five concerns for the third straight quarter.

DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERT RESPONSES ACROSS DEMOCRACY PILLARS

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Overall	12%	38%	43%	7%	0%
Elections	11%	38%	36%	15%	0%
Individual Liberties	18%	39%	27%	10%	2%
Freedom of Expression	17%	44%	28%	9%	0%
Freedom of Association	26%	49%	17%	6%	0%
Voting Access	24%	39%	25%	8%	0%
Equality Before the Law	25%	33%	27%	9%	2%
Legislative Constraints on the Executive	33%	28%	26%	9%	0%
Judicial Constraints on the Executive	34%	38%	17%	6%	1%

Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100% due to skipped and "Don't know" responses.
 Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT), January 2024



MEAN EXPERT SCORE FROM JULY 2023 TO JANUARY 2024



Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker, July 2023 - January 2024



CONSIDERING ASPECTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

"In answering the questions above, how much were you thinking about each of the following aspects of political violence?"

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Physical harm	4%	21%	28%	26%	21%
Direct threats	1%	13%	26%	37%	24%
Intimidation	2%	11%	16%	32%	39%

Note: The number of responses to each question ranged from n = 108 to n = 109.
 Source: Violence and Democracy Impact Tracker (VDIT), January 2024

