

The long simmer of political violence in America

It has been close to five decades since a presidential candidate was injured or assassinated in an attack in the United States. The bid on former U.S. President Donald Trump at an election rally in Butler County, Pennsylvania, on July 13, has shocked people, but there have been at least 15 assassination attempts on presidential nominees and Presidents; five resulted in deaths. This indicates how political violence is inextricably linked with American society and has come to cut across America's partisan political divide. The attempt on Mr. Trump's life comes at a time when the nation is more deeply polarised and divided along racial, cultural and ideological lines than it has ever been in American history. Amidst growing tribalism and polarisation, political violence has found its way back into American politics. However, in recent times, it has come to take a more partisan character.

A shift

The 1960s and 1970s were a tumultuous time in American political history, marked by the most audacious display of political violence. During this time, in three successive election cycles, presidential nominees faced assassination attempts. It was also a time when there was a greater incidence of the far-left utilising political violence to redress issues of social justice. A major shift happened from the 1980s leading up to 2010s with the right co-opting political violence to forward its political agenda on female reproductive rights, the environment and animal rights. An important characteristic of the violence of this time was that it was more ideological than partisan in character.

In the present time, as extremist beliefs and activities which were long viewed beyond the pale of normal politics become more mainstream, unprompted or planned political violence has preponderantly been orchestrated by individuals who do not identify with any



Abhishank Mishra
an adjunct faculty at
Miranda House,
New Delhi

The highly competitive nature of elections since 2010 is a key factor

extremist group and have acted in a more partisan than ideological manner. For instance, in 2011, an Arizona Democrat, Gabby Giffords and 17 others were shot by a gunman outside a supermarket for inciting intense backlash against Republicans for encouraging hatred. In 2017, a lone gunman who was a 'supporter' of Bernie Sanders opened fire on Republican whip, Steve Scalise and Congressional Republican baseball team. And, in 2022, a man attempted to murder Justice Brett Kavanaugh for his views on gun control and reproductive rights.

Views and reasons

Today, a minuscule, but not inconsequential, group of American citizens endorse the use of violence to forward political ideas. In October 2023, research conducted at the University of California by the violence prevention research programme suggested that 8% of the respondents believed that political violence was justified in a democracy. Another study on American citizen's attitudes on political violence conducted by Robert Pape at the University of Chicago, revealed that since the Capitol insurrection attempt on January 6, 2021, nearly 10% of the respondents believed that utilising violence to keep Mr. Trump from becoming re-elected was justified, while 7% supported the use of force to restore him in office. Despite only a small proportion of the respondents registering their support for political violence to forward political ideas, it still puts the country at risk of stochastic terrorism.

Factors that have contributed to the increasing permissiveness of political violence in America include the highly competitive nature of elections since 2010, in which the uncertainty of outcomes has precipitated the use of force. During this time, America has also seen the crystallisation of the partisan division of the American citizenry into Democrats and Republicans with little to no cross-cutting ties. This has led to the creation of

distinct in- and out-groups in which the circulation of dehumanising rhetoric and a Manichean world view has created a readiness for the use of force against the other side.

Rather than containing these tendencies, American electoral institutions and party politics have sharpened these ideological and policy differences. Since 2016, both Republicans and Democrats have morally disengaged with each other and discovered grounds to validate violence rather than condone it. Under the garb of plausible deniability, politicians have played a divisive role in inciting violence to achieve political outcomes and broaden the political divide. For politicians, particularly during election cycles but prior to voting, the use of dehumanising rhetorical exhortations and violence have been effective tools to build voter intensity and engagement. However, the most permissive condition for the spread of political violence in America has been weak institutional constraints on violence and a politicisation of the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. Structurally, based on the popular election of members to both the legislative and executive wing, an impasse between the two has often been resolved through political violence. Further diluting the federal institutional guardrails against political violence, recent legal pronouncements have bolstered the voting influence of state legislatures.

What can be done

In conclusion, in the immediate aftermath of the bid on Mr Trump, the bi-partisan condemnation of the political violence by leaders across party lines in the U.S., will be instrumental to de-escalate and deter violence. However, in the long term it is only systematic reforms in the electoral process, more compassionate, even-handed and transparent policing and conciliatory political speech by politicians that will bridge the growing rift in a polarised society.

Question -1) What is the primary concern highlighted by the author regarding political violence in America?

- A) The increase in violence against law enforcement agencies.
- B) The ideological shift in political violence from the 1960s and 1970s to the present.
- C) The involvement of foreign entities in American political violence.
- D) The partisan nature of recent political violence and its impact on American society.

Question -2) According to the article, which of the following events is cited as an example of political violence involving ideological motives?

- A) The assassination attempt on former U.S. President Donald Trump.
- B) The attack on Gabby Giffords in 2011.
- C) The Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021.
- D) The murder attempt on Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

Question -3) What does the author suggest as a long-term solution to political violence in America?

- A) Increased funding for law enforcement agencies.
- B) Stricter regulations on political campaigning.
- C) Systemic reforms in the electoral process and fostering bipartisan condemnation of violence.
- D) Establishment of a national task force to monitor political groups.

Question -4) What key factor does the author identify as contributing to the increase in political violence since 2010?

- A) Economic recession and unemployment.
- B) The highly competitive nature of elections and the crystallization of partisan divisions.
- C) Increased immigration and demographic changes.
- D) Technological advancements in communication.

Question -5) What proportion of respondents in the University of California research believed that political violence is justified in a democracy?

- A) 2%
- B) 7%
- C) 8%
- D) 10%

Question -6) How has the ideological character of political violence shifted from the 1960s and 1970s to the present day, according to the article?

- A) It has shifted from being non-partisan to highly partisan.
- B) It has become more focused on economic issues rather than social justice.
- C) It has reduced in frequency and intensity.
- D) It has remained largely unchanged in its motivations and targets.

Thank you for attempting!!!

[CLICK HERE](#) to join our telegram channel