



PETE SIMI

THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN THE US

Pete Simi provides a brief overview of the US threat landscape with an eye towards the historical continuity that characterises certain types of violent tactics.

There is growing consensus that various domestic extremist actors pose a threat to US democracy. Few other events in recent US history better represent these threats than the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol (J6). The images of Confederate battle flags and chants of “1776” (referencing the American Revolution) during J6 should remind us that, as William Faulkner once wrote, “the past is never dead, it’s not even past” (1951). Understanding how history remains infused in contemporary affairs and may fuel extremist threats is essential to strengthening democratic governance.

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In short, there are two primary means by which extremism threatens US democracy. First, violent attacks or the threat of violence looms large. We see this in terms of potential mass mobilisation like the J6 attack referenced above and the lone actor attacks that some observers have compared to a crowdsourcing style of terrorism. Lone actor attacks are frequently motivated by racial and religious hatred including the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue attack in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the 2019 Walmart attack in El Paso, Texas, and the 2022 Tops Friendly Markets attack in Buffalo, NY. The tactic is not new dating back to the post-US Civil War violence intended to dismantle Reconstruction-era policies and later utilised during the mid-20th century to counter the Civil Rights Movement. At various points in US history, extremists have employed this tactic to erode civil rights and hinder efforts to embrace democratic principles.

But along with physical attacks, threats of violence directed towards public officials highlights what many fear represent a growing tolerance for political violence in the US. Threats targeting public officials, most of which do not result in physical attacks, may seem less concerning because of the absence of actual violence. Certainly, these threats do not pose the same kind of potential for harm as compared to a physical attack, yet these threats, especially as their volume increases, stress democratic systems of governance.

Threatening public officials undermines the rule of law by attempting to achieve specific goals through intimidation and coercion. And the consequences can be far ranging beyond the individual targets who may experience trauma and be forced to drastically alter their lifestyles. For example, election officials are resigning in significant numbers due to harassment straining states’ capacity to operate safe and secure elections. The growth of these threats underscores a broader crisis related to the declining legitimacy of US social institutions and the political divisions that are intensifying across the country. To be clear, I expect these trends to worsen as the 2024 US presidential election nears and, especially in the months following the election regardless of the outcome which I expect will be an especially dangerous time.

The second type of threat to US democracy, and one that is particularly difficult to confront, involves the mainstreaming of extremism. The relationship between extremism and non-extremism has always been partly subjective because frames of reference change over time and vary according to different situational contexts (e.g., work vs home). When extremism morphs into the mainstream, detection becomes more difficult. In fact, from the perspective of extremists, mainstreaming provides a strategy to engender confusion and blur normative boundaries.

As these cultural changes unfold, what was previously unacceptable may become acceptable (and vice versa). For example, the US contemporary context now includes a major political party in which

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leading representatives, driven by election denialism, refuse to accept the results of free and fair election.

Many of these same leaders also openly promote the white supremacist Great Replacement Theory as evidence of the existential threat Americans face in terms of changing racial/ethnic demographics. Election denial and replacement theory are interwoven conspiracies: Adherents believe part of what makes contemporary elections inherently fraudulent is the orchestrated demographic shifts are intended to sway elections in the favor of the Democratic Party.

Such developments raise important questions for assessing the relative threats that challenge democratic systems. Previous efforts have focused on distinguishing between violent and nonviolent extremism suggesting, at least implicitly, that nonviolent extremism poses less of a threat to democracy. While this may be the case from a security and public safety standpoint, it is less clear in terms of threatening the healthy functioning of democracy. It is hard to imagine a more damaging strategy than undermining the legitimacy of public elections and their results.

Without the legitimacy of elections, democracy, in the US or anywhere else, quite simply, cannot survive. Unfortunately, no magic bullets exist. The disruption of authoritarianism’s growing attraction requires innovative ways to reinforce the rule of law and reimagine civic engagement.

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