

# Building U.S. Resilience to Political Violence

**A (Globally-Informed) Framework for Analysis and Action**

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## About the Authors

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## About the Organizations Behind this Research

**Over Zero** works to prevent and reduce identity-based violence and other forms of group-targeted harm. Over Zero provides trainings and strategic advising, incubates promising approaches, and connects cross-sector research to practice.

**The New Models of Policy Change Initiative at New America** studies the intersection of politics and security, and how successful policy entrepreneurs overcome partisan gridlock

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# Summary

The rise of violence and hate speech, the increase in public rhetoric that seems to condone if not encourage violence, and the declining legitimacy of U.S. democratic institutions are all well-documented. The 2019-2020 period brings a set of political and cultural events – including the run-up to a U.S. presidential election and census – that will likely further escalate tensions and increase the risk of violence and instability.

Research on international violence and peacebuilding reveal that a great deal can be done to prevent (and, if necessary, de-escalate) violence and increase resilience – if leaders with influence and resources are ready to face these challenges squarely now. With this in mind, this paper reviews insights and lessons learned from social science and international peacebuilding – positioning them amidst the specific U.S. experience – to identify and discuss those areas most likely to bolster U.S. resilience in the face of political violence.

**We highlight four risk factors for violence:**

1. elite factionalization,
2. societal polarization,
3. a rise in hate speech and rhetoric, and
4. weakening institutions.

**We then suggest five domains for philanthropic efforts to focus on effective interventions to increase societal resilience to political violence and serve as the long-term foundations of a healthier society:**

1. shaping group norms by bolstering inclusive, influential voices within diverse American communities;
2. supporting targeted communities;
3. protecting, supporting and training the media to heed the best practices of reporting amidst division;
4. laying the groundwork for a coordinated response to violence; and
5. protecting and strengthening capacities for resilience, specifically through supporting democratic institutions and reckoning with U.S. history.

# The Potential for Political Violence in the United States

We define political violence as violence aimed at political ends – controlling or changing who benefits from, and participates fully in, U.S. political, economic and socio-cultural life. The history of political violence in the United States includes recurrent racial and ethnic violence (such as widespread lynchings in the late 1800s and early 1900s); class-based political violence (among others, the Shays and Whiskey Rebellions of the late 1700s, draft riots in New York City during the Civil War, and violence around union organizing in the mid-20th century); attacks on government installations, elections and public officials (such as fires and bombs set off on university campuses by left-wing extremists in the 1970s); and an undercurrent of gender-based violence (including the fact that half of U.S. mass shooters between 2009-2017 included a female family member among their victims) (1, 2).

While many of these violent incidents are known only within the affected communities, global experience teaches that patterns of violence can contribute to – and sometimes predict – future instability. This is significant, as multiple government and private agencies have documented that the United States is currently living through a sustained rise in hate groups, hate speech, and hate-inspired violence (3-5).

## Rising Risk Factors

Recent years have seen a worrying rise in four indicators identified as prime risk factors for political violence and instability: elite factionalization, societal polarization, a rise in hate speech and rhetoric, and weakening institutions. We discuss these risk factors below.

Elite factionalization occurs when a country's politics devolves into distinct groups engaging in winner-take-all competition to promote their own interests at the expense of others (6). Social science associates high levels of elite factionalization with state failure (6, 7), and research points to the rise in the electoral use of wedge issues, particularly the weaponization of race, as a profound concern (8, 9). A second risk factor is that society as a

whole has become more polarized (10, 11). The very nature of our societal divisions differs from even 15 years ago, as Americans increasingly connect political differences to core identities rather than issues. Surveys show that 9% of both Democrats and Republicans believe that violence would be acceptable if their opponents won the 2020 election (12).

A third worrying factor, deeply intertwined with our national division, is the increasing prevalence and acceptance of hate speech that targets groups or individuals on the basis of their identity. This rhetoric spreads through social media and has become a feature of mainstream political discourse; it resembles patterns we have seen historically and globally in the lead-up to mass violence (13).

A fourth and final cause for concern in the United States has to do with indications that some of our democratic institutions could be weakening or losing legitimacy, which, in combination with high factionalization, can be a predictor of political instability (14). While indices (e.g. Freedom House, Polity IV, and Political Terror Scale) assess overall U.S. democracy with a fairly constant score, the United States scores poorly on comparisons of electoral integrity among developed democracies (15); meanwhile its social indices for factionalization, polarization and citizen trust in security forces have starkly decreased (16). Scholars argue that polarization and institutional weakness are closely related, and that institutional risk should thus be assessed by examining real *and perceived* challenges to democratic processes (17, 18). Public trust in the government and the media has recently hit historic lows (19, 20), and the FBI, DOJ, and the Supreme Court have lost cross-partisan credibility (17, 21).

## **Why This Matters Now**

Intensifying the risk factors cited above, the next 18 months will be eventful—including the U.S. census in April 2020, followed by an intensely contested national election in November (22-24). These are known flashpoints for violence. Indeed, escalation can already be seen in rhetoric around challenging unwelcome 2020 election outcomes, and in posts on white supremacist websites (25). During this period, we will certainly face other crises—events abroad, natural disasters, anniversaries, and real or perceived group mobilizations – that may also serve as triggers. To prevent or de-escalate violence, it is critical that philanthropists and other actors engage now. As these risk factors escalate, options for intervening can become limited. For instance, “in-group moderates” – individuals whose commitments to inclusion would make them amenable to joining a cross-group violence prevention coalition – may be targeted by their fellow group members as traitors.

# Violence Prevention: What Works

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Efforts to increase societal resilience to violence will require attention to both long-term structural factors as well as more immediate violence prevention and response.

**Five effective immediate-term intervention approaches are critical:** shaping group norms against violence, supporting targeted communities, training and bolstering the media, laying the groundwork for coordinated responses to events that can trigger or escalate violence, and protecting and strengthening capacities for resilience.

## 1. Shaping Group Norms Against Violence

Funders and other external leaders, by working with national and local leaders, will be in a strategic position to influence perceived norms within communities. Perceived norms are what people think others – especially members of “their group” (26)– will approve of or are doing. Such norms are critical because they can sometimes influence individual behavior even more than an individual’s beliefs (27). For instance, when people believe hateful rhetoric is socially acceptable, they are more likely to accept and even spread it (28). Critically, if no one within a group speaks out against such rhetoric (or discrimination or violence), group members may well infer that everyone in their group accepts it, leading to a negative spiral of increasing expressions of hate and fewer people standing up against it.

Research in post-conflict societies has shown that shifting perceptions about how people should behave toward outsiders may actually be more effective at changing behavior than attempting to change what people believe (29). The good news is that changing norm perceptions may also be easier to do than changing attitudes (29, 30).

## What Funders and Leaders Can Do:

In the short term, funders and leaders can focus their efforts in two ways. First, they can act early to empower additional leaders—locally and nationally—who can speak out against violence and have influence within their respective groups. Such leaders or “in-group moderates” are critical in voicing and upholding inclusionary group norms. They are often the first to be targeted (often as traitors) as societies move towards violence. Outside resources can often protect and empower them by connecting them to each other and helping them build platforms and tools for outreach to their fellow citizens.

Second, to maintain and protect non-violent inclusionary norms, funders and leaders can build coalitions of local leaders spanning diverse roles and capacities. Internationally, communities that have abstained from violence amidst surrounding war have depended upon multiple, collaborating leaders with deep trust from their communities (31). Funders and leaders can thus identify key, respected local norm-shapers from diverse groups, then help them build cohorts and capacities to reach members of their own group and to communicate with members of other groups.

### CASE STUDY

#### Amidst War, Networks of Inclusionary Leaders Sustain Peace in Tuzla, Bosnia

Amidst Bosnia’s civil war, the Mayor of Tuzla along with a network spanning local government, civic organizations, and religious leaders promoted and upheld inclusionary norms against division and violence. Surrounded by war, the group emphasized a unified Tuzlan identity that proved strong enough to resist the ethnic and religious divisions underlying the surrounding violence. Despite nationalists’ attempts to influence elites and media, this coalition of actors generated strong norms of city-wide cooperation, responded to events that could trigger violence, and provided victims psycho-social support. Even while the city was besieged, Tuzlan residents of all religions and nationalities resisted violence. When a shell hit the city, killing 71 youth celebrating a sports victory, the city unified in mourning rather than turning against one another (32, 33).

## 2. Supporting Targeted Communities.

Discussions about political violence in the United States too often center on the role of national leaders and law enforcement agencies. However, global experience in violence prevention demonstrates that it is essential to engage leaders from communities targeted with (and/or affected by) political violence. Leaders from targeted communities are often already engaged in preventing and addressing the impacts of targeted violence. They bring vital resources to the table, including: a real-time knowledge of local events; contextual analytic knowledge; the capacity, flexibility, and likelihood to take action in response to early warning signs; and, a long-term commitment to local conflict resolution (31).

Partnering with leaders from targeted communities can thus procure higher quality information, analysis and risk assessment; aid in communication with and mobilization of other local communities; and more effectively interrupt cycles of violence (34). In Northern Ireland, for example, the truth-telling and cross-community relationship-building work done by community leaders often ran significantly ahead of the official peace process (35).

### What Funders and Leaders Can Do.

Ensuring that targeted communities are heard can start with steps as simple as making sure that they are represented and listened to in elite and public conversations. To ensure that leaders from targeted communities have quick access to policymakers and support in the case of escalation, funders can invest in efforts to network and build additional external support for such leaders (31, 36, 37).

Second, efforts can promote leaders from targeted communities as experts and public figures—not just as speakers on behalf of their community. This will better position targeted communities to be heard, and in so doing challenge negative depictions of these communities. Lastly, public-facing leaders from targeted communities often face significant levels of harassment and threats. Providing security assistance to threatened community leaders is an investment in violence prevention as well as longer-term resilience.

Sustaining civil society in a diverse democracy requires ongoing, long-term support to civil society leaders and communities at risk of being targeted, even in non-crisis times. In the intermediate and long term, where the goal is to sustain a healthy civil society, funders can channel resources to community organizations that promote healing from violence, continuity of leadership and organization, and efforts to build inclusive local or

national identities. They can also support correcting inaccurate mainstream narratives about targeted communities and increase the representation of targeted communities in popular culture and in positions of authority. This demands thoughtful approaches to diverse policy areas from education to criminal justice, housing, and the environment. Evidence suggests that short-term programs meant to change emotions towards a targeted group (e.g., distrust of Muslims) or entrenched narratives and stereotypes (e.g., “immigrants take our jobs”) do not work. However, long-term efforts that expose participants to the perspective and narratives of the other group in repeated, structured intergroup contact, have shown more effectiveness (38-41).

#### CASE STUDY

##### Targeted Communities & Local Leadership in the Anti-Lynching Movement

The anti-lynching movement provides a U.S. example of diverse leaders using cross-cutting identities to connect and effect change. During the 1880s and 90s, the white public saw racial terror lynchings as a brutal but justified means of punishing and preventing the sexual assault of white women by African-American men. African-American journalist Ida B. Wells used in-depth investigation to reveal that, *in every case*, this narrative was either fabricated or severely exaggerated. Spurred by Wells’ reporting, a constellation of reformers mobilized their networks and organizations into organized efforts against lynching. In leading roles, this included Wells herself along with the NAACP and Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) (both born out of the interracial movement of the early 20th century). These groups mobilized various stakeholders, such as northern whites, southern blacks, and white southern liberals, through targeted campaigns and in-depth reporting.

Through the CIC and other organizations, black women put in long-term work to mobilize white women – whose security and purity was used to justify lynching – around a shared Evangelical identity. This led to the founding of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL): an offshoot of the CIC, the ASWPL was comprised of white southern women who used their unique role in their own community to stop lynchings and change minds.

Together, this constellation of actors, born out of the work of Black researchers, journalists, and activists, effectively changed social norms around the perception and practice of lynching (42-45).

### 3. Supporting, Protecting and Training the Media

A free and fair media allows the public to evaluate the government and hold it accountable and is thus a vital source of resilience. Today, repeated falsehoods and misleading information, including from the highest echelons of government, that are often recycled through traditional and new media erode the public's ability to hold government accountable. The media itself has also come under attack.

The trend toward public segmentation into self-selected media bubbles, or echo chambers, is a second way that media trends heighten the risk of violence. We know that rhetoric can be more dangerous when its audience has limited (or no) alternative sources of information (46). For example, a single radio station broadcasting hateful or misleading rhetoric within isolated rural communities in Rwanda was argued to have accelerated the 1994 Rwandan genocide (47). Although Americans have access to a very wide variety of information sources, self-sorting and information bubbles create worrying similarities to environments where people have no sources to refute hate speech and incitement (46, 48).

Third, in a polarized society, journalists can unwittingly become tools for division and escalation. For instance, reporting on fringe or extremist views (since they are "newsworthy") may actually depict them as more prevalent or socially acceptable than they are, and may even bring them to new audiences. How media is resourced, and how journalists are trained to report amidst division, therefore matters enormously.

#### What Funders and Leaders Can Do:

In the short term, the press needs support in the face of threats or attacks. This can occur through the provision of security, legal representation, and attempts to garner public attention. Each of these investments can help to counter potential erosion of press freedom. Secondly, funders and educators can invest in training journalists to heed best practices for reporting on inter-group divisions (without unintentionally exacerbating existing escalatory dynamics). Training can also encourage media figures to reduce their reliance on reporting that unnecessarily emphasizes group distinctions, and instead focuses on intergroup similarities (49, 50). More positively, funders and educators can train and encourage media to deliberately choose to serve as a vehicle for communication between groups, helping reduce bias through storytelling and reporting (51).

In the intermediate to long term, it is first critical, but not sufficient, to sustain media institutions and support investigative reporting. Secondly, media support should focus on reaching different segments of a polarized

public, by bolstering sources of information that are trusted by the intended audience. Effective programming to this end will engage trusted local leaders to reach and influence target audiences, support local and ethnic news and hubs, and partner with and educate media that serves a variety of regions and identities. Ultimately, efforts will need to address structural causes of media segmentation, including the funding and regulatory environments for traditional and new media.

#### **4. Laying the Groundwork for Coordinated Response in the Event of Violence**

While research has illuminated risk factors that heighten the likelihood of and may trigger violence, nobody is able to predict exactly which trigger will happen, how, and when. As such, it is critical to build a broad capacity for quick response. International violence prevention calls this capacity “Early Warning and Response.” It occurs at national and local levels and involves engaging community, government and private actors in identifying and monitoring risks and coordinating responses (34). The central lesson this field offers the United States is the importance of engaging a constellation of actors with diverse and complementary capacities for response (31).

##### **What Funders and Leaders Can Do:**

In the immediate term, funders and leaders will need to generate and/or strengthen early warning and response networks across the United States. This can happen through connecting and supporting the following groups: communities targeted with and affected by violence (who often have the greatest capacity for immediate response and are the first to witness escalating events or indicators); other partners who have access to complementary knowledge, resources and influence, channels for sharing information and for engaging in planning and responsive action, and proactive collaboration to address underlying dynamics of risk; and, when conflict dynamics (threaten to) bleed over at a regional or national level, those with influence over key actors (e.g., media, politicians).

In the immediate, intermediate, and long term, preventing and responding to acts of violence will require interventions targeted at those groups promoting, or at risk of participating

in, violence. This will require investments in: a) preventing radicalization (for which there is extensive literature on best and harmful practices) (53-59); and b) de-radicalization (efforts that promote exit from extremist groups) (60-63). For reasons made clear above, it will also require leadership in moving support for white supremacist ideologies and actions, the source of the overwhelming majority of U.S. hate killings in recent years (64), out of the mainstream of American life.

#### CASE STUDY

#### ISBCC: Leveraging Diverse Relationships to Effectively Respond to Violence

Long before the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) had built strong relationships with other faith leaders and institutions, local government, law enforcement agencies, and the media. Within hours of the marathon attack, the ISBCC took a clear public stance against violence, opened the mosque to stranded marathon participants, and reached out to the mayor's office. To ensure cross-group communication after the bombers were linked to an ISBCC sister organization, ISBCC responded to every media request they received. To support authorities, ISBCC called for community cooperation with law enforcement agencies. Meanwhile, to ensure the safety of its community, it hosted Know Your Rights Trainings and set up a free hotline for legal assistance for community members. To honor victims of the bombing, ISBCC held a prayer vigil that was featured in the *Boston Globe*. For the first Friday prayers after the attack, ISBCC invited interfaith leaders who, with press present, made statements of unequivocal support for the Muslim community. In sum ISBCC successfully managed a crisis that could have led to escalated targeting and tension by leveraging existing relationships and collaborating with partners (52).

## 5. Protecting and Building Capacities that Exist for Response & Reduction of Risk

This paper has focused on near-term action that can prevent and defuse violence. But building a healthy, resilient society is a long-term proposition which requires the health of all society's foundational institutions. Gains in resilience will be made by investing in efforts to rebuild public trust in government and improve the functioning of government at the local and national levels. States, local governments, and citizens groups can be a bulwark against democratic backsliding (15, 64, 65). Citizen participation

in free and fair elections serves as a major source of resilience, while gerrymandering and voter suppression, on the other hand, diminish the effectiveness of representative government, heighten perceptions of antagonistic identities, and increase distrust in the political process (65).

Global experience also teaches that past histories of political violence, when left unaddressed, can trigger and accelerate new violence (66, 67). Contentious aspects of American history have already re-emerged as flashpoints, such as conflict over the fate of Confederate monuments. But the process of addressing such history is almost always contentious and can itself stoke divisions (68). In thinking about reckoning with history, Americans have much to learn from the extensive global literature on not just why it is necessary, but how to sequence and manage such processes to avoid further destabilizing vulnerable societies (69).

### What Funders and Leaders Can Do:

While many of these challenges require long-term, political solutions, an array of counter-strategies is available in the immediate and medium term to promote participation in democratic institutions: strategies that fight gerrymandering, voter suppression and intimidation while supporting voter registration, voting rights, and flexible voting.

## Conclusion

A resilience-based strategy to counter political violence is, by definition, a whole-of-society strategy. It will never produce the media coverage of a strategy that is based on law enforcement or security framing. What it will do is strengthen, not just resistance to violence, but national institutions and civic fabric, the twin pillars of the American experiment. In short, as data from Northern Ireland to Kenya suggest, resilience makes a difference. And the time to implement it is now.

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