

Opinion **US society**

## A new era of political violence is taking hold in America

Violent populism is growing as norms unravel and break down

**ROBERT PAPE**



Donald Trump is escorted offstage by secret service agents after he was shot in Butler, Pennsylvania, in July © Rebecca Droke/AFP/Getty Images

**Robert Pape** 10 HOURS AGO

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The killing of United Healthcare executive Brian Thompson in New York last week, which appears to have been motivated by “ill will towards corporate America”, is the latest sign that a new era of intense political violence is taking hold in the US.

What is significant about political violence in America today is the extent to which it garners significant mass public support. Luigi Mangione, the man charged with murdering Thompson, has become a hero to some on social media. And national surveys we have carried out at the University of Chicago have found that, from 2021 to 2024, 10 to 15 per cent of Americans consistently support violence for political goals that they endorse.

Political violence in the US has ebbed and flowed for decades, but past episodes of what can be called “violent populism” have been rare. In the early 1920s, for instance, America witnessed a dramatic rise in dues-paying membership of the Ku Klux Klan. This was a period of extensive violence against Black people, Jews and Catholics that swept across states from Indiana to Georgia and beyond, in support of the Klan’s political goal of ensuring the country was “one-hundred per cent American”.

And in the 1960s, political violence surged in the form of major assassinations, riots in America's largest cities and the emergence of domestic terrorist groups such as the Weather Underground. The extent of public support for and acceptance of political violence during this turbulent period is astonishing.

Today, we are living through a new era of violent populism in America. A striking number of politically motivated acts of violence have recently been aimed against "establishment" targets, ranging from federal buildings and political leaders to university students and college leaders and now, it seems, to corporate executives.

Over the past six years, the US has also witnessed mass shootings inspired by the rightwing conspiracy theory of "The Great Replacement" — the idea that the government is deliberately replacing the white population of the US with growing numbers of minorities.

There have also been numerous assassination attempts against leaders on both left and right. In October 2022, an individual sought to harm, if not kill, the then Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi. And in June the following year, a man was arrested while surveilling the Washington home of former president Barack Obama with weapons and explosives in his van. In 2022 a man was charged with the attempted murder of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a Donald Trump appointee. And in July this year, Trump himself survived an attempt on his life. Two months later, another armed man was arrested for attempting to assassinate Trump.

There have also been a significant number of violent protests in pursuit of a range of political objectives during the same period. In the summer of 2020, the protests that followed the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis were overwhelmingly peaceful, but over 500 of the approximately 10,000 protests were violent. Police stations, vehicles and officers were attacked amid calls to "defund the police", a goal associated with the left. Violent protest on the right, meanwhile, reached a peak on January 6, 2021, when thousands of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol in an effort to prevent the peaceful transfer of power to then president-elect Joe Biden.

In wake of the Hamas attack on Israel October 7, 2023 hundreds of protests — both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli — took place in cities and on college campuses across America. The number of incidents of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim violence and intimidation rose.

This rise in violent populism in America today is deeply disturbing. We are witnessing

not just the normalisation of political violence, but also the growth of significant public support for such acts among mainstream Americans. The more that the norms against political violence erode on one issue, the easier it is for them to break down or unravel on others. With the killing of a corporate leader on the streets of Manhattan, another threshold has been crossed.

Why is this surge happening now? Support for political violence is not simply linked to political conspiracy theories, decline of distrust in democratic institutions, and use of social media. It also appears to be strongly associated with the ongoing transformation of America from a white majority to a white minority, genuinely multiracial democracy.

Our surveys find that when Americans think “America is a systemically racist country against non-white people and always has been,” they are twice as likely to support violence for grievances associated with the left. And when they believe “the Democratic party is trying to replace the current electorate with new people, more obedient voters from the third world”, they are five times more likely to support violence for grievances associated with the right.

Given our polarised times, the era of violent populism and the turbulent battle for American identity is not likely to end any time soon.

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