

Covering Political Violence: Risks Throughout the Election Cycle

Covering risks of election-related violence presents newsrooms with unique challenges. Media coverage can inadvertently create an atmosphere of fear, which can chill public participation in the election process, play into the hands of extremists, or be used to justify government crackdowns. Reporting in line with best practices can help to mitigate these risks.

Core Principles of Covering Political Violence

- ✓ Use precise language to avoid signaling that the violence on the ground is more widespread or accepted than it is, or that the ongoing threat level is more severe than is supported by evidence.
- ✓ Provide appropriate context and framing about the causes of the violence, including any intersection with extremist political movements and conspiracy theories.
- ✓ Engage with targeted communities to ensure coverage also addresses how the violence has affected them, their responses, and their needs.
- ✓ Avoid providing platforms for inflammatory rhetoric, misinformation, or extremism.
- ✓ Highlight responses to address and mitigate the violence.
- ✓ Keep the public informed with up-to-date information so they can have a clear understanding of the risks and mitigation efforts.

Background: Understanding the Risks and Early Warning Signs During an Election Cycle

- Familiarize yourself with risks and early warning signs for violence that might occur throughout the election cycle:
 - **Intimidation, harassment, and group-targeted violence**—for instance, targeting specific groups based on their perceived political, racial, or religious identity. In times of heightened risk, Black, immigrant, Muslim, Jewish, Arab, and LGBTQ+ communities are particularly likely to be targeted by violent actors.
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- **Targeting candidates, voters, or political parties** with threats, intimidation, and rhetoric.
- **Targeting the voting process**—for instance, polling locations, drop boxes, counting locations, county certification sites, electors, key decision-makers, and so on.
- **Clashes at rallies or campaign events**, whether between supporters of different parties or candidates, supporters and armed groups, supporters and security forces, or when candidates are themselves targeted.
- **Efforts to dispute results**, including violence between protestors, supporting different parties or candidates, supporters and armed groups, or supporters and security forces.
- **State-sanctioned violence** that intimidates civilians—whether those directly targeted or the public more broadly—from civic engagement throughout the election cycle. Such violence may also be condoned by authorities but carried out by non-state actors.
- **Victory violence**, where the winning party and its supporters express dominance over the other party and its supporters.

Guidance for Covering Risks of Political Violence Throughout the Election

■ Put violence in context.

- Who perpetrated the violence? Was it a single individual or a small group of people? Did the violence involve law enforcement using force? If so, what kind of force (e.g., physically touching people, using tear gas or pepper spray, etc.)? Did it involve a known member of an extremist group?
 - If extremist groups were involved, are there well-established connections between the groups and more mainstream actors? What are the specific contexts in which they exist?
 - Note: Use specific numbers in describing any violent actors or violent incidents that did occur. Avoid vague terms like “a lot” or “frequently.” Relatedly, avoid conflating the actions of a few individuals with the actions of a broad group. Doing so is likely only appropriate when violence is being perpetrated by a group acting in an explicitly organized and violent manner, such as an unlawful armed militia.
- Is the incident part of a trend of violence—at the national or local-level—or is it an outlier event? Is there a history of violence against the targeted group or institution?
- What are the root causes of the violence, including any dangerous or group-targeted narratives underlying the violence? What is the short- and long-term impact of the violence?

Example: [How the 'Great Replacement Theory' Has Fueled Racist Violence](#) - TIME

- **Provide specific, detailed information for how concerns are being addressed.**
 - What responses are local actors—targeted communities, civilian leaders, law enforcement, community groups—taking to limit or de-escalate the violence? How are community members taking action to resolve both short-term violence and the longstanding issues that feed it? Ensure coverage does not exaggerate any threats and inadvertently suppress voter turnout.
 - Note: Violence and threats during an election cycle are frequently used to suppress voter turnout, so it is particularly important to provide continual, clear information about voter safety, using care not to make violence or threats seem more widespread than they are. Highlight the safety plans that polling locations and our overall voting system have implemented to ensure a free, fair, and safe election, even in the face of any threats or violence.

Example: [In face of threats, election workers vow: 'You are not disrupting the democratic process'](#) - Stateline

- **Engage with targeted communities.**
 - How are members of the relevant community responding or repairing? What support — financial, connections, mental health—are they requesting? Elevate local voices and leaders from the targeted community in your reporting.
 - Election violence often targets marginalized communities in an attempt to suppress their vote or portray them as a threat in order to mobilize other voters. Stories that depict the full humanity and perspective of those targeted can defuse further election violence.
 - What resources—trainings, expertise, support organizations—are available to support targeted communities in repairing in the face of threats or violence?

Example: [Stop AAPI Hate group launches campaign to prevent candidates from using anti-Asian language](#) - NBC

- **Showcase relevant disapproval for violence, noting that the overwhelming majority of Americans reject political violence.**
 - Who is speaking out against this violence? It is particularly helpful to showcase condemnations from those who might otherwise be aligned with the perpetrators or who are from the same political party. These “surprise speakers”—individuals that the audience would not expect to be condemning the violence—can be particularly effective because they demonstrate that you can maintain group or party membership without using or supporting violence.

Example: “Minnesota DFL Chairman Ken Martin issued a statement Sunday saying the party didn’t condone such rhetoric...”I’m grateful for the work John is doing to combat systemic racism, and I’m glad that he recognizes yesterday’s rhetoric was inflammatory, hurtful, and does not help move our state forward in the fight for justice,’ Martin wrote.” - [Star Tribune](#)

- **Highlight accountability for instances and threats of violence.**
 - How have others been held accountable for past or related violence, including any legal, social, and/or financial costs they have incurred? This might include civil or criminal lawsuits, job loss, suspensions on social media, or compromised personal relationships.

Example: [Trump under fire again for violent language and dehumanizing anti-immigrant rhetoric](#)
-PBS

- **Avoid sensationalist language in depicting violence, particularly in headlines. For best practices on headlines, images, and social media content, see [our guidance](#).**
 - Avoid language that activates fear or anxiety, including war and natural disaster metaphors (e.g., “violence erupted” or “protestors flooded the streets”). This makes violence seem more uncontrollable and reduces individuals’ sense of agency.

Further Resources for Covering Elections and Related Violence

[Election Violence Prevention Resource Page](#)

Over Zero

[The Authoritarian Playbook: How reporters can contextualize and cover authoritarian threats as distinct from politics-as-usual](#)

Protect Democracy

[How to Cover Electoral Conflict](#)

Amanda Ripley and Rachel Kleinfeld

[Facts Forward: A Journalist’s Guide to Combatting Disinformation](#)

PEN America

[Election Overtime Project](#)

Election Reformers Network and the Bridge Alliance

[Covering Elections and Voting in 2024: A Media Guide](#)

The Elections Group

[Knight Election Hub](#)

Knight Foundation, MuckRock, OpenNews, Newspack, and Hearken

[ICAP Election Hub](#)

Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection Election Hub



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