July 21, 2022

Political Violence in Michigan

To: The Joyce Foundation, Trusted Elections Fund, and The Klarman Family Foundation
From: GQR

Michigan, like the rest of the country, recognizes that political violence represents a problem and a threat to our democracy. A very small minority justify political violence. The state broadly supports policy solutions to address the problem, including policy solutions that directly address recent and prominent examples of political violence in this state.¹

However, as is the case with the national dataset, respondents demonstrate a lack of awareness of and intensity toward the problem of political violence². Michigan is the only state where there has been a recent, active plot to kidnap the Governor by political extremists; the Michigan State House is one of the few nationally that have seen armed protestors roaming the halls; there is no Ohio Militia, there is a Michigan Militia. Despite all this, Michigan does not believe it faces a bigger problem with political violence than other states.

The role of advocates and people committed to democracy in this state is less about trying to convince people to support specific policy solutions; they already do. It is more about educating the public about the depth, breadth, frequency, and impact of political violence in this state in order to make policy solutions more viable to policy makers in the state.

Key Findings

- Most in Michigan believe political violence is a problem (72 percent total problem; 49 percent major problem); few in Michigan (just 26 percent) believe this state faces a bigger political violence issue than other states.

- Part of the problem is that relatively few have paid attention. Only 15 percent have followed the Governor’s kidnapping case and its trial very closely, and just 54 percent have followed it closely. Similar results emerge when asked about the May 2020 armed occupation of the State House. In an age when so many other issues compete for attention, political violence struggles to find a place.

¹ This memorandum highlights key results of an online survey of 507 adults in the state of Michigan taken April 6-12, 2022. Because the sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation in the panel rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to multiple sources of error, including, but not limited to, sampling error, coverage error, and measurement error. If this poll were conducted among a probability sample, the margin of error would be +/- 3.46 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval. The Michigan study is part of a national survey of over 6,000 interviews conducted as the same time.

² This Michigan study is part of a national study conducted over the same time period.
Michigan is not more likely to justify political violence than the rest of the country. This is an important finding as it speaks to the reputation of the state. Despite an arguably greater incidence of recent examples of political violence, people here are no more likely to justify political violence than the country as a whole (just 15 percent say political violence is justified or can be justified in some circumstances). Similarly, both the Michigan Militia and the Wolverine Watchmen generate substantial criticism among those familiar with these groups.

Michigan strongly supports policy solutions to end political violence. This includes measures that address some specific incidents in this state such as such as prohibiting firearms in the State House and other sensitive places.

- A 74 percent majority support making it a felony to threaten an elected official, school board member or poll worker.
- A 65 percent majority support the Michigan Secretary of State using her authority to ban guns from polling and vote count locations.
- A 64 percent majority support prohibiting guns in public buildings, polling stations or in large crowds.

No evidence emerges suggesting that raising the issue of political violence publicly reduces civic participation. In this survey, we asked half of the sample to rate their level of civic engagement at the beginning of the survey and half rated their level of engagement after an extended discussion on political violence. This experiment attempted to measure the impact of political violence on democratic participation. Unlike our national survey which saw no real change or difference, the sample that heard a discussion of political violence showed a significant increase in civic engagement, at least in terms of voting.

Friends and family make the best messengers in Michigan. Outside of this orbit, no single messenger enjoys the full faith of the state, though some political actors (Obama, Whitmer) enjoy real standing among their fellow partisans and, as is the case in national polling, law enforcement and military also have some relative standing.

The strongest messages for raising the profile of this issue include:

- We cannot have a democracy without having law and order.
- Most of the great changes in our country have been led by people committed to non-violence, including the civil rights movement.
- There are better ways to make a point than violence.
Understanding and Justifying Political Violence in Michigan

All told, 72 percent of Michigan adults believe political violence represents a problem and 49 percent believe it is a major problem. These results are no higher and no lower than the national average. The state interprets this issue at least somewhat through a partisan lens, as the perceived threat level rises among Democrats (62 percent major problem, compared to 38 percent among Republicans).

The state does not, however, believe it faces a bigger problem than other states: 26 percent say it’s bigger problem, 21 percent report it being less of a problem, and 53 percent say it’s about the same. Again, Democrats see this as being more of an issue than Republicans, but even among Democrats, only four in ten (40 percent) believe Michigan faces a bigger problem with political violence than the rest of the country.

Part of the issue is that people have not paid attention to political violence and/or have less familiarity with its meaning. Slightly more than half (54 percent) followed the story about the plot to kidnap the Governor closely (just 15 percent very closely) and similar numbers followed the story about the May 2020 armed occupation of the State House (just 51 percent closely). Those that have paid attention are more likely to see a problem. Democrats have generally followed these stories more closely, but attention also rises among men, older residents and college educated Michiganders.

**Figure 1: Those Following Coverage of Political Violence Think MI Has a Problem**

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3 For this question, we defined the issue as “political violence is violence or the threat of violence to influence a policy or an election at the local or national level,” and “violent political extremism when groups use violence and intimidation to influence a policy or an election.” The latter definition produced a stronger response, but only marginally so. The data in this section represents a combined dataset of the two samples.
The biggest political obstacle to progress on this issue is not support for policy change or even complications around the First or Second Amendment, but the lack of real understanding or recognition about how serious this issue is.

Despite a more checkered recent history, Michigan does not betray more tolerance for violence or for extremism than the nation as a whole. Only 15 percent say political violence is (just 1 percent) or can be (14 percent) justified. The national number of people who say political violence is or can be justified is 17 percent. Another 85 percent insist that political violence is never justified (57 percent) or almost never justified (28 percent). Similarly, while Gretchen Whitmer has some critics in this state, most react negatively toward the two most prominent state extremist groups.

**Figure 2: Militia Groups Very Unpopular; Whitmer Split**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorable</th>
<th>Unfavorable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net ID</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What matters demographically in terms of justifying violence in Michigan is the same thing that matters demographically in the rest of the country: age. In fact, people under the age of 40 are five times more likely to justify political violence than people over the age to 50 (26 percent and 5 percent, respectively). Michigan shows more partisan variation (16 percent among Republicans, just 7 percent among Democrats, 21 percent among Independents) than the national sample. Incidence also spikes among people of color (23 percent).
Figure 3: Young People More Likely to Justify Political Violence

Justification for political violence is also conditional. Some circumstances may warrant a violent response for some people and other circumstances may warrant a different response for other people. Conservatives are more likely, for example, to react to perceived government infringements on the Second Amendment.

Figure 4: Armed Mob and Land Use Provoke Most Justification

*For each of the following, please indicate whether you believe violence is sometimes justified, can be justified in some circumstances, almost never justified or if you believe violence is never justified.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Is/Can Be Justified</th>
<th>MI Total</th>
<th>Dems.</th>
<th>Inds.</th>
<th>Reps.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If an armed mob violently attacks a peaceful protest</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the government denies you the use of your own land</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the government restricts your ability to practice your religion</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If politicians from one party illegally overturn the results of an election</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If law enforcement breaks up a peaceful protest with rubber bullets and tear gas</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suggestions that one quarter or one third of the people are primed for political violence in some public data is likely overstated and reflect question wording. While there have been some really ugly incidents here, there is no indication that this state is more tolerant of political violence or extremists than any other state. All that said, the higher levels of justification for political violence among younger people is jarring. Advocates who do work in this area need to target more direct efforts there.

**Broad support for policies to reduce political violence**

Two recent incidents marred the state of Michigan. One was the alleged plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer. While this survey was fielding, a jury returned a (mostly) not guilty verdict. Despite the legal outcome, a 63 percent majority believe the state did not go far enough in prosecuting militia members responsible for this plot; only 36 percent believe they went too far. This question produces a strong partisan divide: 92 percent not far enough and 8 percent gone too far among Democrats; 33 percent not far enough and 66 percent gone too far among Republicans.

The second incident was the May 2020 occupation of the Michigan State House in Lansing by armed protesters and militia members. A 64 percent majority support a law prohibiting the carrying of guns in
public buildings, near polling stations or in large crowds. A 62 percent majority support this restriction even if the gun owner has a permit allowing him or her to carry a gun. As above, Republicans show some resistance with slightly more than 60 percent opposing, but this step divides gun owners evenly.

**Figure 5: Majority of MI Supports Restricting Guns at Polling Places and Public Buildings**

![Bar chart showing the majority of Michigan residents support restricting guns at polling places and public buildings.]

The state reacts similarly to the Secretary of State using their executive authority to issue a rule banning guns from polling and vote count locations: 65 percent favor, 34 percent oppose. Among younger Michiganders—again, more likely to justify political violence—support holds at 66 percent for this step.

Michigan overwhelmingly supports making it a felony to make a violent threat against an elected official: 74 percent favor, just 26 percent oppose. Even those who otherwise justify political violence support this step by a 60 to 39 percent margin. Similarly, a supermajority of 86 percent support their local prosecutor or district attorney increasing efforts to investigate, arrest and prosecute people who engage in political violence: 57 percent strongly favor this course. Among people of color, an 83 percent majority support this step.

Michigan reveals some partisan resistance to some of these steps. Specifically, steps that involve guns draw opposition among 60 percent or so of self-ascribed Republicans. However, a broad and convincing majority—including one third of Republicans—support everything tested above. A slim majority of gun owners support everything tested in this survey. For the most part, this is not a debate over policy.

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4 This question was asked to half the sample with the language about gun permits and half the sample without this language. The overall impact of this language is modest.
Impact of political violence on civic participation and role of law enforcement

In this research, we attempted to simulate a broad discussion about political violence in order to measure the impact that discussion could have on civic participation. Specifically, half of the sample answered questions about civic participation at the beginning of the survey—vote enthusiasm, willingness to donate, knock on doors, attend a rally, etc.—and half of the sample answered these questions after a series of questions on political violence, including this one.

**Figure 6: Hearing About Political Violence Has Little Impact on Civic Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How likely are you to participate in the November elections in each of the following ways:</th>
<th>Sample that was not exposed to examples of political violence</th>
<th>Sample that was exposed to examples of political violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share your views about an issue or candidate online</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donate money to a candidate or organization</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer as a poll or election worker</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March or protest a cause</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer your time on a political campaign doing organizing or outreach</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knock on doors in your community</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We conducted a similar experiment in our national research. What is different about Michigan is that voter enthusiasm *increased* in the sample that read the discussion of political violence (in the national sample there was no statistical difference). This jump is particularly steep among Independents. There is less difference in the treated and untreated sample in other aspects of civic engagement.
There is no evidence to suggest that discussing the issue of political violence broadly impairs civic engagement. However, this experiment does not simulate real-world conditions where the threat of political violence is real and proximate. No public opinion instrument can simulate such a hypothetical. But we did ask a question about what would reassure the public if they read a rumor about armed protesters gathering on Election Day. Because many believe political violence is crime, they are most reassured by a police or law enforcement response. This holds less true for people of color, yet law enforcement remains the leading suggestion in this community as well.
Imagine that it’s a week before Election Day and you read a rumor in social media about armed protesters planning on gathering at the polls on Election Day. Which TWO of the following would make you feel the most safe about showing up and voting in person:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total POC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A statement from law enforcement saying the police will patrol polling stations to prevent violence.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements from local and federal law enforcement saying interfering with an election is a crime and they will prosecute anyone convicted of using violence or intimidation on Election Day.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An emergency declaration by the Secretary of State saying that anyone nervous about voting will have the option of voting by mail.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement from state election officials guaranteeing safe access to voting.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement from a non-partisan voter protection group saying they will provide community volunteers and escorts so ensure everyone can safely vote.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement by bi-partisan group of state and local elected leaders including the Governor, Mayor, city council representatives and state legislators pledging to prevent any violence and intimidation on election day.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement from civil rights groups saying that how important it is for all people to vote and providing escorts and volunteers to ensure everyone can safely vote.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement from faith leaders and clergy saying they will provide community volunteers and escorts to ensure everyone can safely vote.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Messaging on the issue of political violence**

As is the case with any kind of messaging—political, commercial, etc.—peers, friends and family comprise the most powerful messengers. When it comes to advocating on the importance of confronting political violence, an 81 percent majority “trust a lot” or “completely trust” their friends and family. Outside of this intimate group, no other messenger enjoys the broad trust of the state. A number of political actors have some traction—though obviously subject to partisan variation—and both law enforcement and military personnel generate more confidence on this issue than other groups.
Figure 9: Friends and Family Most Trusted, But Majority Do Not Completely Trust Anyone

The strongest message also draws on law and order. Most people consider political violence a crime, more so than a political act, and believe it should be treated accordingly. An argument raising the example of Martin Luther King Jr. and the non-violent civil rights movement also fared quite well in Michigan. Notably, in focus groups conducted online—drawing from people all over the country, not just in Michigan—participants were asked how they would dissuade a friend or family member who was considering an act of political violence. Most employed the parental strategy of diversion, which is to say they tried to move them into another (peaceful) means of getting their point of across. This kind of messaging finds support in this survey as well.  

\[See appendix for message text\]
Conclusions and recommendations

1. Advocates for efforts to reduce political violence in Michigan should not try to single out their state and suggest Michigan faces a bigger issue than other parts of the country, despite the headlines. Most people do not believe Michigan struggles more with political violence and suggesting otherwise is a quick way to lose credibility with the public.

2. The most important job right now is educating the public about the threat and frequency of political violence. Most policies enjoy broad support here and efforts to persuade people to support more efforts to investigate, arrest and prosecute people who engage in political violence (86 percent) are unnecessary. The goal is to create more intensity around this issue to increase political will around already popular policy solutions.

3. Young people are far more likely to justify political violence by factors of four or five. Whether this reflects their relative maturity or some other dynamic, efforts to reach out to those who may be thinking about political violence should be targeted to people under the age of 30.

4. The strongest framework for elevating this issue is a law and order message, and law enforcement represent some of the strongest messengers. Again, most people believe political violence is a crime. For some groups, however, particularly people of color, the civil rights example represents a stronger message. For people who might be communicating more directly with friends and family who may be considering political violence, the diversion message recommends itself.
## Message Language

### (LAW AND ORDER) We cannot have a democracy without law and order. People have the right to protest and get their point across, but as soon as they break the law by acting violently or threatening elected officials, they cross the line and law enforcement should fully enforce the laws on the books.

### (CIVIL RIGHTS) Most of the great changes in this country, particularly in our recent history, have been led by people committed to democracy and non-violence. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that this country can fundamentally change for the better only through peaceful protest and democracy, not through violence.

### (DIVERSION) We live in a democracy. There are better ways to get your point across than through violence. We can vote, protest, post message on social media, organize behind a candidate who shares our views or work to vote out elected officials who disagree with us.

### (DIVISION) Our country is being torn apart by political division. Republicans attack Democrats, Democrats attack Republicans. We will not always agree with each other but on big things, like the need to settle our disagreements peacefully, it is imperative that we can unite as Americans.

### (250 YEARS) While not always perfect, one hallmark of American democracy is the peaceful transfer of power and the non-violent process of resolving political disputes through the elections and free speech. The rise of political violence threatens our 250-year American democracy.

### (FIRST AMENDMENT) The First Amendment does not give you the right to threaten an elected official. We can take some simple steps, such as increasing monitoring of people who explicitly call for violence, removing guns from polling places and increasing penalties for those who commit acts of political violence without infringing on our constitutional rights.

### (LOCAL) Democracy requires participation. Hundreds of locally elected officials have been threatened with violence just for doing their job. Some are resigning from office and potential candidates are refusing to run in the first place because they are worried about threats to their family.

### (BI-PARTISANSHIP) Republican Senator Rand Paul said, "Chaos, anarchy. The violence today was wrong and un-American." Former President Barack Obama said, "It's not a protest, it's not a statement. It's people taking advantage of a situation for their own purposes, and they need to be treated as criminals." Despite our disagreements on many, many issues, Democrats and Republicans share the belief that disagreements should be settled through elections, not through violence.